

Unsuitable Forms

Character in the Fiction of Saul Bellow
from *Dangling Man* to *Mr Sammler's Planet*

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Ph.D.

University of Edinburgh

1996



Declaration

This thesis has been composed by myself.

Neil Willett, 19 September 1996

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

(Regulation
3.5.13)

Name of Candidate ...Neil Willett.....

Address
.....

DegreePh.D..... Date ...21/9/96.....

Title of Thesis .."Unsuitable Forms: Character in the Fiction of Saul Bellow from.....

.....Dangling Man to Mr Sammler's Planet.....

Number of words in the main text of Thesis ...71000.....

The thesis's two starting points are Bellow's 1967 short story "The Old System" and his 1959 essay "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!". A close reading of the former finds that the antipathy expressed in the latter - an antipathy towards critical preference for "meaning" over "feeling", towards the "practice of avoidance" in which literature is interpreted as being primarily a system of motifs and symbols - is implicitly present in the fiction itself. The readings of the novels from Dangling Man to Mr Sammler's Planet attend to the workings within them of the "deeply readable", of the proliferation of "meanings" which provokes a kind of hermeneutic double-take; the texts are replete with motifs and symbols, structured so that they invite attempts at "deep reading".

The novels also display an awareness of this, are conscious of their own "preferences", and are concerned for the consequences of their "practices". In Dangling Man, the "deeply readable" is given a free hand, occupies the entirety of the text, but thereafter Bellow's novels react against it, against their own emergent "meanings". The anxiety which drives this reaction derives from Bellow's approach to the notion of "character"; his fiction's structures knowingly configure "character" as an unsuitable form, co-opt it as a means to the narrative's own ends. The novel's conclusions exhibit the disengagement of these narrative agencies from that which they have educed into the form of a "central character", rendering it ultimately opaque, preserving it at the last from the threatened dissolution into the text's patternings.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank firstly (and lastly) Christine and Robin Willett.

Special thanks also to Pamela Tosh; and to Sandy Blair, whose patience and generosity were of the kinds for which acknowledgements pages were invented.

Colin Nicholson's supervision was invaluable, as was Jane Goldman's assistance in the preparation of the earlier versions of the typescript.

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1. Introduction, via "The Old System"

Published at the median point between *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970), Saul Bellow's short story "The Old System" seems, according to the pattern of structural and stylistic development which this thesis argues is evident in his work, possibly the most useful point of entrance to the study of his oeuvre. It constitutes a catalogue, in compressed form, of many Bellovian narrative techniques and thematic bugbears, and shares with its author's other fiction a skepticism concerning the moral propriety of the enterprise of fiction itself. In particular, more clearly than in the baggy-monster novels which precede and follow it, "The Old System" exhibits Bellow's anxiety over the volatile and hierarchical relationship between storytelling and its subject matter, his keen awareness of the power of metaphor to distort the nature of its referents.

The dramatic action at the story's core concerns Isaac and Tina Braun, brother and sister, who become estranged but are reunited at the latter's deathbed. The tale is told, to himself, by their cousin Dr Braun, approximately three years after the fact. In his early fifties, a bachelor and scientist specializing in "the chemistry of heredity", Dr Braun devotes a winter Saturday in his apartment to "the hopeless pleasure of thinking affectionately about his dead" (Isaac having died two years after Tina).¹ In contrast to the tumultuous passions illustrated in the actions of these objects of his "useless love", Dr Braun seems to exist in a state wavering between a frozen rigor and a ghostly insubstantiality (77). He looks out from his window, "admiring the long icicles on the huge, red, circular roof tank of the laundry across the alley", his gaze "crossing and recrossing the red water tank bound by twisted cables, from which ragged ice hung down and white vapor rose" (44, 49). The climax of the tale is prefaced by an image of Dr Braun as he "rose, stood", as if moving in sympathy with that steam, "looking at the shafts of ice, the tatters of vapor in winter blue" (81). Dr Braun, self-sealed in his home, looks out of a window which is also a mirror, figuratively reflecting his condition. For when he is done remembering, he does not know at first what to make of the sum of his efforts, being "bitterly moved", but mistrustful of the value of such emotion, suspecting that "perhaps the cold eye was better. On life, on death" (82).

Something of a Tiresian androgyne, his body is described as sharing characteristics of both sexes, while he also seems to be beyond sexuality: squatting in his morning bath, he reaches to soap "the tip of his parts, somewhere between his heels", while "the swell of his belly" suggests that he shares in the "excessive female weight" he sees in Tina and in Aunt Rose, her mother (44, 48). His sexual history goes unmentioned, apart from an incident at the age of seven, when the young Tina has him "press his child's genital" against her "fat-flattened thighs" - she lifts "her dress and petticoat (...). The belly and thighs swelled before him" (50). It is as if he has remained, sexually, a child, in middle age curiously disembodied, his only physical pleasure taken in maturity appearing to be the "fragrance" and taste of coffee (44). Apart from that, he is *all eyes*, looking out on the roof tank, or being "well pleased" by the order prevalent in his "neat kitchen", or fondly recalling the Robbstown country club on which Isaac, a property developer, built a shopping centre - the country club had been "restricted, of course. But Jews could look at it from the road" (44, 59). This emphasis on the visual sense is to the point, as "The Old System", in common with many of Bellow's works, concerns itself with the economy of vision, with the drawbacks and the benefits of perceptual limitations; is the "cold eye" truly superior, or does it lack opacities and accretions which might constitute not a curse but rather a saving grace?

"The Old System" is itself proof of Dr Braun's worry (or hope) that "those who try to interpret humankind through its eyes are in for much strangeness - perplexity" (63). He recalls Isaac's "ruddy brown eye, the tough muscles of the jaw working under the skin"; Isaac, from whom Dr Braun has learned the story of estrangement, has strong religious feelings, affection for his family, and, like Dr Braun, "plenty of time for reminiscences" (77, 64). Having made his fortune in the building trade, Isaac's thoughts are "a web of computations, of frontages, durations, drainage, mortgages, turn-around money" (65). Isaac is a solid piece of construction, whereas Tina, whose "ideas came out of *House Beautiful*", is a less predictable, less rigidly structured character (66). Dr Braun repeatedly notes how "old-fashioned", or otherwise, his relatives were; in the behavioural sense of that term, Isaac displays a concern for the recognition of his Jewish origins and for the survival of Jewish

traditions, while Tina appears to be relatively a creature of "fashion" (48, 51, 55, 60, 62, 77). The story of their reunion explores these differences and reveals them to be differences of degree, rather than of kind; both are "old-fashioned" in the ontological sense, kin to each other in the basics of their being. The "old-fashioned" persists even when immersed in modern, materialist America through such survivals as "the slightest troubling ambiguity in one of Cousin Sylvia's eyes", "the effect of a suppressed historical comment", perhaps, on her husband Isaac's success in transcending "the abuses of the Old World" in America, "the land of historical redress" (65). The eye registers, and is changed by, the "humankind" it endeavours to interpret; "perhaps the cold eye was better" than one subject, by virtue of its involvement with the human, to distortion.

For most of the tale's duration, Tina plays the demonic, distorting antagonist. Hers is a "different sphere of understanding, painful but truer than the old" (69). She blames Isaac for her own refusal to take him up on a lucrative business opportunity, and for many years afterwards shuns and slanders him. On falling terminally ill (with cancer of the liver, sadly appropriate for one of such choleric temperament), she hears of Isaac's desire for what she categorizes as a "'Jewish deathbed scene'" of reconciliation, and informs him via an intermediary that he can have his wish - for twenty thousand dollars, cash (68). She does not need the money; her purpose is less easily ascertainable than that. She "had seized upon the force of death to create a situation of opera. Which at the same time was a situation of parody" (70). She evicts Isaac from that solid ground on which he is accustomed to sit, and places him in an unfamiliar landscape which he must negotiate if his visit to her deathbed is to be more than mere theatre; the twenty thousand dollars is not a price of admission, but of exit from the parodic realm. Her strategy is, in truth, the impetus which drives Isaac towards recognition, and rejection, of his self-constructed and self-satisfied identity, as his religious observances and deference towards tradition have long masked his absorption into "the void of America", the sphere of the commodified, against which he has believed himself to be insulated (59). On delivering a bribe to the gentile businessman Ilkington, a younger, less assimilated Isaac sees Ilkington as being "like a high slab of something generically human", and regards a proffered glass of gin as being "like something distilled in outer space", its colourless transparency standing for the "void" in which

phenomena bear no recognizable trace of origin, lacking in opacities, in accretions (59). Unwittingly co-opted by the "void", Isaac has already built an "ugly apartment building in Albany", goes on to construct on Ilkington's country club the aforementioned shopping centre (although not, Dr Braun concedes, one "especially brutal in its ugliness"), and begins to speak of "'my people'", referring not to family, friends and forebears but to "those who lived in the buildings he had raised " (54, 59, 60).

Dr Braun thinks back to the pastoral scenes of his youth, to the comparative purity of the Mohawk river's water then, in the years before Isaac's housing developments despoiled the area. He remembers a sycamore near the river as being "a huge tree like a complicated event, with much splitting and thick chalky extensions", the simile almost forcing the pun on the notion of the *family tree* (46). As Isaac's business enterprises pollute the land, so his attempts to master his family threaten to rob it of its complexity, of its essential strangeness and perplexity. He styles himself as "an old-fashioned Jewish paterfamilias", keeping in Sylvia in the manner to which he would have her become accustomed, "obliged to forget how to drive" (54/5, 65). He sentimentalizes, and aspires to dominate, women; it is the "sentiment" displayed in his annual pleas for reconciliation which provokes Tina to rebuff his contrite approaches: "'Now Tina, we are brother and sister. Remember Father and Mother. Remember ...' - 'I do remember! Now get the hell out of here'" (67). Tina recognizes these visits as being "the pious thing" for Isaac to do "before the Day of Atonement": "'he's not going to practise his goddamn religion on me'" (66, 67). She prefers to remain embittered rather than play a role in her brother's desired ritual. Other roles which Isaac would have women play are often less respectful still; he takes "great pleasure from masculine reminiscences", regaling Dr Braun with tales of his sexual exploits such as that with "Dvorah the Greenhorn, on her knees, her head in pillows (...), and her feeble voice crying '*Nein.*' But she did not mean it" (61). Although whether or not Dvorah really "did not mean it" is a question without a reliable answer (such as, for instance, *hers*) in the text, the dubious nature of the younger Isaac's behaviour, and of the older Isaac's pornographic scenario ("her buttocks soared, a burst of kinky hair from the walls of whiteness"), is accentuated by his turn of phrase - "'I fought on many fronts'", a militaristic metaphor

"meaning women's bellies" - and by Dr Braun's observation on its milieu, that it is "a sound American way" of putting it (61).

But also, in the world according to Dr Braun, such an intimation of a war between the sexes is not entirely mistaken. Isaac's patriarchal ambitions are an implicit riposte to the ascendancy in his family of powerful women. His father appears as a variation on the figure of Nicholas II, "that weak, whiskered arbitrary and woman-ridden man" whose decrees despatched the young Uncle Braun to fight in the Russo-Japanese War (46). Once in America, he moved into dealing, became "monarch of used stoves and fumigated mattresses", sporting "a small, pointed beard, like George V, like Nick of Russia. Like Lenin, for that matter" (47). Isaac after him favours the despotic style, pursues an "old-fashioned" domesticity "on an Eastern European model completely destroyed in 1939 by Hitler and Stalin", shaping his family into a living rebuke to its persecutors (64). But his materials in this project are not all pliable to his will, and in his imitation of his father's pseudo-autocratic American pose he fails to apprehend where the real power in his family finally resides. Tina is very much the daughter of her mother Rose, who was for Dr Braun "the original *dura mater*", with "the joy she took in her hardness" visible to him "in the light of her eyes"; "she was building a kingdom with the labor of Uncle Braun and the strength of her obedient sons" (48). She inspects and disparages the suitors of her children, holds court in her kitchen, cultivates meanness and despises softness - "she blamed uncle Braun's death on Bromo-Seltzer, which, she said, had *enlarged his heart*" (emphasis mine, 52). On Rose's death, Tina asserts her claim to the role of matriarch, taking from her mother's finger a ring, the "one feminine adornment" she had worn, originally a gift from Isaac and, on her mother's death, intended for Sylvia (54). To Dr Braun's eye, Tina shares her mother's physical peculiarity: Aunt Rose "had a large bust, wide hips, and old-fashioned thighs of those corrupted shapes that belong to history", while Tina, "obese" as a child and then "for a while thinner, more civilized", regains that "excessive female weight" in marriage, a woman with "a totalitarian air", exercising her will to power over others and over her unruly body, "absorbed in the dictatorship of her huge person" (48, 49, 51, 62).

There is an ongoing power struggle between the male and the female Brauns, with Tina's acquisition of the ring constituting "a *putsch* in the bedroom" (62). Isaac appears to be the only male Braun capable of taking a stand against her, with his "positive male energy" so admired by women who find it lacking elsewhere (60). Certainly, Dr Braun is presented as being sexually more an absence than a presence. There is no direct evidence that he is a celibate, but he is delineated as such by the cumulative portrait which renders him as being sensorily, and sensually, deracinated, content to gaze at, and observe with wonder, the morphology of the female body. His apparent retreat from the physical seems to be prompted by his experience of the Braun matriarchs; there is an erotic undertone to the detail in which he recalls the sight of Rose in her kitchen, "more feminine with her corset off and a gaudy wrapper over her thick Victorian undervests, camisoles, bloomers", her "silk stockings (...) gartered below the knee" (53). He recollects Tina's "tremendous female form" as being the manifestation of some primordial idea" which pressures her towards "majesty" in size as in character (62, 63). He pays particular attention to their hairstyles, Rose's face being "red, her hair powerful, black", the child Tina crowned with "smoky black harsh hair" (48, 50). In maturity, Tina's hair is "sternly combed, (...) tugged back from her forehead, tight, so that the hairline was a fighting barrier" (62). There is nothing in Dr Braun's experience of which we read that is more primal than his childhood encounter with Tina, where he feels "too small and frail for this ecstasy", suffers "agonies of incapacity and pleasure"; she exposes herself so that "he saw the barbarous and coaly hair. He saw the red within" (50). When Tina marries, her husband, "bald Fenster", has "a sentimental, dependent look", prompting Dr Braun to "sexual thoughts, about himself as a child and about her childish bridegroom" (53). Thereafter Fenster vanishes from "The Old System" almost as completely as the hair has vanished from his head, and we are given little or no sense of the state of the marriage. There is an implication that Dr Braun and Tina have been wed somehow themselves by their pre-pubescent gropings, and that she has set for him the limit of experience; at the story's end, Dr Braun closes his eyes and sees, "red on black, something like molecular processes - the only true heraldry of being", finding in dream and in science what Tina has shown him with her own body (83). It seems to him, in the original primal scene, that "she was drawing him - taking him somewhere with her. But she promised nothing, told him nothing"; she is not only the custodian of

mysteries which will perplex him throughout his life, but a threatening, castrating sphinx - "her face was menacing. She was defying" (50).

There seems to be little or no room in Dr Braun's world for any relationship between the sexes that is not predicated upon systems of dominance and submission, and his attitudes towards sex can seem at times pathological, but we should bear in mind that his is a case of apparently arrested development, that his Tiresian aspect is engendered (as it were) by his withdrawal not only from sexuality but also from *himself*, by that "unhealthy self-detachment" he witnesses in others, but is unaware of in himself (44). Tempting as it is to dissolve "Dr Braun" into a pathologized system of cause and effect, Bellow's structures demand that we meet, and resist, such temptation. Bellow's narratives consistently present the reader with parodic readings of their central characters, but also, in their conclusions, cancel out that parodic tendency, leaving a residue of character which lies beyond the claims of irony. Dr Braun transcends his affinity for the "cold eye" to attain a narratorial dignity comparable to that of Pushkin's *Onegin*-poet, himself a victim of "time's desiccating blast", and one "blind to every apparition", such as the "bore" *love*, which commonly seduces human vanity, but who retrieves from the sphere of parody his characters Eugene and Tatyana.²

Dr Braun's half-conscious undertaking - he is not as foreknowing, or as cynical, as the *Onegin*-poet - is to extricate himself from a determining system which would reify him, and indeed the objects of his "useless love", as false doubles of their actual selves. When he notes "what fertility of metaphor there was in all of these Brauns", himself "no exception", it is the use of the word "fertility" which traces the spirit of "metaphor" back to its origin (55). Tina is the carrier of the modern plague of irony, her deathbed joke an example of how, "once humankind had grasped its own idea, that it was human and human through such passions, it began to exploit, to play, to disturb for the sake of exciting disturbance, to make an uproar, a crude circus of feelings" (82). As the inheritor of the story, Dr Braun is himself heir to Tina's ironic demon, which he must tame if he is to avoid the shallow "art of amusing self-observation and objectivity" which he observes with distaste in "every civilized man today" (44). Simply put, Dr Braun must do the story *justice*, be true to the truth in the

events which he relates to himself. His task is also that which faces Isaac, to negotiate the deceitful landscape of "parody", to rescue from it some solid ground of truth.

After Tina has made her morbid sales-pitch to Isaac, he finds that his lifelong assumptions, his "old-country Jewish dignity" and his material success (previously taken as proof that "his reading of life was metaphysically true") are rendered invalid and revealed as complacent (46, 61). He consults a rabbi in an effort to get "old laws and wisdom on his side" (78). But "orthodoxy had no remedy", Tina having "made too strong a move" (78, 79). Consulting "his father's copy of the Psalms", Isaac finds that, for once, such scripture holds nothing comprehensible: "the black Hebrew letters only gaped at him like open mouths with tongues hanging down, pointing upward, flaming but dumb", like gargoyles atop some gentile church, or like demons from "the lid of hell", in the Yiddish metaphor Dr Braun applies in the story to the Russo-Japanese War - "as though hell were a caldron, a covered pot" (79, 46). His beliefs subverted by the demonic Tina, Isaac finds himself standing on the infernal surface previously visited (in metaphor) by his father. He sees, as if for the first time, the urban squalor which he has helped to construct, as he passes by "the tedious mortar of tenements", and witnesses the decay of the material in "auto skeletons, machine entrails, dumps" (78, 79). His eye gains a terrible transparency, with nothing in it capable of ordering chaos, or of recognizing printed characters as a coherent system, as he observes the environmental rot around him as if "he were not Isaac Braun but a man who took pictures" (79). What was invisible to him now rises into view; taken on a tour by boat of the Hudson in his capacity as a member of a commission on pollution, he sees one of the "savage scavenger eels" which "dominated" the waters hauled out onto the deck for the committee's inspection, "slimy black, the perishing mouth open" (73).

This ominous yawning can be seen also in the person of the professor who lectures the committee on how "raw sewage" is being dumped into the river ("you could watch the flow from giant pipes", 71). The professor has "ruined teeth. Much dark metal in his mouth, pewter ridges instead of bone" (71). He gestures with his *pipe*, in discomfiting echo of those pipes carrying "cloacae" to the river. His proposed solution to the problem is the despatch of "all waste into the interior of the earth, far under

the crust" (71). So speaks the voice of gravity, of death, a voice which divests Isaac of his former pride in "building squalid settlements" but offers no hope, only the promise of a world *filled* with waste (73). Isaac figuratively escapes the gravitational pull of these gaping "open mouths" by literally *taking flight*, breaking with his lifelong refusal to travel by airplane. It is the first stage in a curious process of rebirth; offering a prayer in "clear internal words", he leaves the ground on which he has spent his life and built his living, and breathes a new air: he "released the breath he had been holding (...). Above the marvelous bridges, over clouds, sailing in atmosphere, you know better than ever that you are no angel" (79). He ascends higher still; at the bank, as he collects the money demanded by Tina, the door of the vault is "circular, like the approaching moon seen by space navigators" (80). He arrives at the hospital prepared to meet his sister "on her terms", and rises again, in an elevator, admiring "the silent, beautiful negro woman dreaming at the control": "he found himself observing her strong, handsome legs, her bust, the gold wire and glitter of her glasses, and the sensual bulge in her throat, just under the chin" (80). It is as if this previously rapacious eye, which had reduced Dvorah to a mere orifice, is merged with that of Dr Braun, the resulting hybrid, neither aggressively penetrative nor fetishistically passive, offering a healthier way of looking than either alternative has offered.

The elevator operator, beheld by Isaac with respect for her appearance's integrated wholeness, is meanwhile performing an angelic function, delivering him towards a kind of "heaven" (72). Once on Tina's level of the hospital, he senses an intimation of mortality in "the rank of empty wheelchairs" in the corridor (80). It is another set of "open mouths", a reminder of "the route he" - at sixty years old - "too, must go, and soon" (81). What he finds in his reunion with Tina is a variety of the paradise of which he had previously dreamed, thinking of how - "in heaven" - he could speak of the matters dearest to him with such reticent but decent gentiles as Ilkington's son, with whom he conducts a conversation of sorts - composed of "incommunicable diversities, kindly but silent contact", the only mode of communication possible between the two "on earth" - on the Hudson trip (72). The lesson which Tina teaches Isaac is that such angelic conversations need not be put off until the afterlife. He begins to see how the indignities which he has suffered in meeting Tina's terms

have been instrumental in his liberation: "the thing was done to punish, to characterize him, to convict him of something, to put him in a category. But the effect was just the opposite. What category? Where was it?" (81). Tina's strategy has been an attempt to "characterize" him, to impose on him a burden of definition, to expose him as a partly reified, partly ossified creature of satire, as one true to the life of which he has led. At Tina's bedside, he attains a space beyond irony and parody. Tina refuses the money and, "too feeble, too drugged" to embrace her brother physically, she does so figuratively, by giving him Aunt Rose's ring. "Excessive" as her weight may have been, it was expressive of her will to live, and now it has been dissipated by the advance of the cancer; kissing her, Isaac feels "the bones of his obese sister. Death. The end. The grave" (82). Tubes lead "from her body into excretory jars beneath the bed", linking her with the polluted city itself, a touch of deadly metaphor which stresses how temporary the reunion must be, and how small the space reclaimable from metaphor is (81).

Dr Braun, now rising to his feet to regard the frozen world outside, is "feeling with them this work of wit and despair, this last attempt to exchange significance" (81). Isaac and Tina arrive at an "exchange" which cancels monetary and metaphoric "terms" - a "settlement" in which there is nothing "squalid" - but Dr Braun's relation to such "significance" remains problematic. Compounding his evident thinning-out of being is his placement within another sphere of irony, displaced as he is into the third person by the narrator of "The Old System", who occasionally implies consternation at, or impatience with, Dr Braun's narratorial abilities: "Isaac (...) was so full of things. 'Overthronged' was the odd term Braun chose for it", we read (70). The narrator can seem to be irritated by Dr Braun's inertness: "before his tranquil look the facts arranged themselves - rose, took a new arrangement. (...). We were getting somewhere" (51). Dr Braun's ability to extend to Isaac and Tina a fully respectful recognition of their "significance" seems to be questioned by the narrator's ambivalence concerning Dr Braun's own ability to "signify". Dr Braun is not so much self-effacing as he is *effaced of self*, a figure sunk in fiction, who performs the angelic feat of achieving for Isaac and Tina a substance which he is denied for himself. In a sense, his dead cousins leapfrog over him into a vivid life which he himself lacks. He saves them from the condition of fiction by

responding emotionally to their story; at its end, "Dr Braun, too, had tears in his eyes", not quite weeping, but sharing in the emotion of the lachrymose reunion scene (82). It is as if the ice which cakes the roof tank has melted a little, as if the heat of the liquid within has carried through to the surface of its container. But Dr Braun cannot bring himself to abjure the benefits of the "cold eye", even if its temperature "would be proportional to the degree of heat within" (82). But however strong his conscious doubts, his own "cold eye" is "bitterly moved" to brim with salt tears (82). The action of Dr Braun's reminiscences is a process of convection; the story of Isaac and Tina is an "old system" persisting, and expanding, in his "eye". The tears are a residue of the story itself, and they make its subject (into) *matter*.

Dr Braun cannot think his way past his fundamental questions, namely, "why life, why death. (...) why these particular forms - these Isaacs and these Tinass?" (83). But he does arrive at a justification of troublesome "emotions", in that, in experiencing emotion, one receives "an intimation of understanding", a "promise" that one might be awarded, eventually, an answer to the continuing perplexity (82). And in his kinship with Isaac and his fascination with Tina, Dr Braun's concession to "emotion" opens the way towards a justification of these "particular forms". He tends to dissolve the world around him into representative phenomena which depict the workings of a larger process; closing his eyes at the story's end, "he saw, red on black, something like molecular processes - the only true heraldry of being. As later, in the close black darkness when the short day ended, he went to the dark kitchen window to have a look at stars. These things cast outward by a great begetting spasm billions of years ago" (83). His ultimate mysteries are patterned in red and black, as first revealed to him by Tina in their youth, and these mysteries persist, whether seen by Dr Braun in the skies or in a woman's body, or by Isaac, who, arriving at Tina's deathbed, finds "the meaning of her black eyes impossible to understand" (81). At the end of "The Old System" there is an ambiguity as to whether such mysteries contain Tina within them, or if they are themselves products and components of her mind and body. She is a "fertility" goddess of sorts, firstly providing the dubious bounty of "metaphor", but also representing the female sexuality which both Isaac and Dr Braun, in their different ways, attempt to fight or flee. Dr Braun admires that which is static, and shrinks from

the gestative; early in the story he breaks off to ponder the situation of the newborn in its "transparent bag or caul. Lying in a bag filled with transparent fluid, a purplish water", "in its membrane and clear fluid", with its "shining, *innocent-seeming* blue-tinged transparency" (emphasis mine, 47/8). Just as Isaac's business pursuits corrupt the waters of the Mohawk River, Dr Braun's arch-rationalism is an attempt to contain, to freeze, the liquid motion of life.

The purpose of "emotions", of "these particular forms", is their survival in memory, so that not all that follows after the fact will be mere *fiction*. If Tina is a mythic figure, given the suggested homology between herself and the secret workings of life itself, and as such sacred, then the body of the central tale centres upon her profane aspect as the mistress of metaphor, dispensing it as *pharmakon*, both poison and cure, to Isaac. Her stratagem involves using a fiction - the supposed price of admission to her bedside - to fight fiction, in particular her brother's reification of his self. Her power is also what draws Dr Braun *back to the fact*, and excites his frozen self into fluidity. In keeping with her role as curator of mysteries, her eye is more often unreadable than it is "cold" or warm, her black and unfathomable gaze being the gravitational centre of her brother's familial feelings and of Dr Braun's metaphysical speculations. What she holds for these men, which is also what she directs them to reclaim, is *meaning*, a point of rest from the play of fiction which otherwise occupies their lives. She is also, according to the argument which this thesis will present, an avatar of a central feature of Bellow's fiction, that is, an ambivalence towards the fiction-making process, that process being conceived of in his work as both falsifier and facilitator of truth. In clarifying what is particularly Bellovian about this ambivalence, we must attend to his treatment of the "eye" which not only perceives, but also projects.

"The cold eye on life, on death" is a phrase borrowed from Yeats by Bellow elsewhere, in his 1963 essay "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction", where it is used to summarize the philosophy of First Sergeant Welsh in James Jones's *The Thin Red Line* (1962), a philosophy "not ultimately hard", according to Bellow, by virtue of its necessity in time of war, in "the casting off of a childish or feminine or false virtue, despised because it cannot meet the test of survival", in which "the new idea

cruelly assails the old, exposing its conventionality and emptiness".³ Bellow envisions a continuous struggle, red in truth and claw, in which failed versions of reality fully merit the summary justice meted out to them by newer versions, themselves a greater distance from their own eventual collapse. "Conventionality" and "emptiness" go hand in hand to the gallows. The tone of Bellow's comments implies an aloof skepticism on his part, a "cold eye" being cast on the Darwinist drama unfolding. But Bellow's chilliest gaze, this thesis argues, is reserved for the "conventional and empty" in his own work. In the same piece, Bellow states that the novelist in his works, "usually by the method of omission (...) criticizes what he understands as the errors and excesses" of his contemporaries; in this thesis, I hope to prove that Bellow's works display an intense, if latent, anxiety concerning their own "errors and excesses", an anxiety exhibited at its strongest, and simultaneously most oblique, in the deployment of a "method of omission".⁴

Charles Newman claims that "it is rather as if Bellow as critic were the straight man for Bellow the novelist", so that the comparatively free-form comedy of the novels plays off the sterner, more didactic voice of the essays, the latter seen by Newman as being "a series of Sammler-like rhetorical questions on the theme, 'What is to be done?'" (Newman identifying the essayist Bellow with the obsessively ratiocinatory central character of the novelist Bellow's seventh work).⁵ The problem with this notion is that it suggests an inadequacy in "Bellow the novelist" in that he is nothing without his foil, while failing to see where a "double act" of sorts is most importantly at work within the confines of the fiction itself. If a Bellow novel plays off the feed-lines of a "straight man" - that is, a combination of sage and stooge whose precepts are worth addressing, endorsing or subverting - then the straight man in question is most specifically the Bellow novel immediately previous to it. At the conclusion of the 1968 story "Mosby's Memoirs", Willis Mosby suffers an epiphany in which, his vanities revealed, he recognizes himself as "a finished product", who in leading his life and writing his memoirs, has "completed himself in this cogitating, unlaughing, stone, iron, nonsensical form".⁶ Mosby is exposed as having been something of a "straight man" for the ambitious but absurd "funny man" Hymen Lustgarten, whom Mosby cuckolds and then patronizes, but whose energies resist the forces (such as Mosby) that would weigh him down, characterize, convict and categorize him;

"perhaps, Mosby thought", contemplating Lustgarten's physical peculiarities, "a man like Lustgarten would never, except with supernatural aid, exist in a suitable form".⁷ What motivates Bellow's novels into life, whether as comic performances or as satiric attacks, is, I will argue, their consciousness of their predecessors, and of themselves, as "finished product". Each Bellow novel displays anxieties concerning the consequences of attaining a "suitable form", reacts against the words that go to make it up, against its own emergent shape.

Newman notes how in Bellow's fiction "the self (...) is gained by *shedding* intellectual baggage, the irony being that what is shed nevertheless seems to be the substance of the work".⁸ According to Marcus Klein, "Bellow's hero in his first motion moves toward unburdening and sloughing off".⁹ Richard Lehan places Bellow as a thematic descendant of Nietzsche, of Byron, and of Dostoevsky's underground man; "all of these spokesmen were trying to create a residual man, unencumbered, unrestrained, free".¹⁰ Biyot K. Tripathy contends that, in Bellow's endings, "a mythic sense tends to bust through the crust of empirical sedimentations".¹¹ The recurring image is of a residue, of that which persists after the shedding or sloughing off of "sedimentations". The title of Bellow's most recently published book at the time of writing plays upon the same notion; *It All Adds Up* presents itself as "a gathering of some of the more readable essays", in Bellow's words, selected from the large body of "trifles I wrote to support myself".¹² The title, therefore, refers to a process of chaotic accretion rather than to a sense of emergent and comprehensible form; his non-fiction pieces are, in retrospect, "trifles", albeit capable of moving their author to an occasionally fierce self-criticism (Bellow writes of "the bitterness of my dissatisfaction in rereading some of these pieces").¹³ Any pleasure found by Bellow in his rereading lies in his sense of distance from his previous essayist stances: "it gives great satisfaction nonetheless to have rid oneself of tenacious old errors. To enter an era of improved errors".¹⁴ Just as Bellow's critics comment often upon the process of disburdenment at work in his fiction, so Bellow himself chooses to disencumber himself of baggage and sedimentation, the residue of the writer's voice thus free to take on the weight of other, "improved", restraints. Although Bellow asserts a claim towards a kind of progress, he sees himself

as moving still within the sphere of "error", a mode of hopeful transport perhaps preferable to arrival at the "suitable form", the "finished product", of correctness.

Bellow's neatest formulation of the relationship between the imposing environment and the imposed-upon self is spoken by Charlie Citrine, the narrator of *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), when he observes that "the USA was a big operation, very big. The more *it*, the less *we*".¹⁵ Citrine, like Dr Braun, cares deeply for his "significant dead", but does not envy them the power of vision which he attributes to them: "in the next realm, where things are clearer, clarity eats into freedom. We are free on earth because of cloudiness, because of error".¹⁶ The use to which this "freedom" must be put, the "historical assignment" which those "on earth" must fulfil, is the effort "to break with false categories", the struggle to "vacate the personae".¹⁷ Bellow's fictions, self-consciously occupying the space between "fact" and the "next realm", compose themselves of "false categories" and "personae", embrace "error" in order to analyze the colonization of "*we*" by "*it*". His novels are palimpsests, in which his central characters have their essential selves, their unmediated voices, largely effaced by the layers of satiric "personae" which Bellow applies over them. The reader, if not always the central character, engages in a process of sorting through "false categories" in order to apprehend whatever it is of that character which persists beneath the occluding surface. For Charlie Citrine, as for any Bellow character, the task is to perceive the presence of the "fictional" in what presents itself as "non-fiction", to become properly skeptical of the latter's pretensions towards synonymy with "fact". For any Bellow reader, the task is to locate within the play of Bellow's demonic, destabilizing metaphors points of rest, albeit provisional and temporary, in which character vacates its "personae", in which "false categories" are omitted.

Newman writes of Bellow as being a postmodernist-by-default, "unable to locate the 'lost content' which his method presumably champions" - the transcendent meaning, the old system - "that lost content which in fact is his basic subject matter".¹⁸ The presumption on Newman's part lies in his simplistic assumption that Bellow is "unable" to fix upon that which he prizes above all else. Bellow's fictions are designed so that their "content" is not so much "lost" as *omitted*, purposefully

rendered as elusive, inaccessible within the confines of the sphere of fiction. Brian McHale, adapting the term coined by Stanley Fish, writes of postmodernist "self-consuming artifacts" (such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*) as being fictions made up of discontinuous narratives sequenced in such a way that each negates what has gone before, "destabilizing the ontology of [a] projected world and simultaneously laying bare the process of world-construction".¹⁹ Bellow, writing about postmodernism, about the loss of authoritative sources and of absolute notions of truth, is not himself a postmodernist creator of such "self-consuming artifacts" but rather an author of *self-effacing fictions*; just as each novel becomes the straight man for its successor, it also divides itself into *false* and implicitly *actual* content. His fictions turn upon their own fictional nature, in satiric assaults upon their own vanities; as Michael Seidel writes, in the genre of satire, "to guard against hypocrisy (...) is to distrust the very metaphoric properties of language that carry across codes of meaning", with the result that "satiric subjects", such as the narrator of "A Tale of a Tub", "are forced into positions where metaphoric conceptions collapse around them".²⁰

An essay by Cornel Bonca perceptively addresses Bellow's relation to the postmodern "zone" (Thomas Pynchon's term, although Bonca cites Jean Baudrillard's "hyperreality" and Fredric Jameson's "hyperspace" as relevant coinages for that against which Bellow's fictions react).²¹ Bonca observes how Bellow's reaction to the prevailing cultural conditions takes the form of a "retreat into significant space", from which area he attempts to bring a "sense of the sacred into the world of the novel".²² However, "more often he succeeds in dramatizing how the soul, encased in its significant space, maintains its sense of the sacred by turning the postmodern world into the profane".²³ Bonca sees characters such as Moses Herzog and Artur Sammler as avatars of their creator, their epistemological strugglings with their worlds inherited from Bellow himself. And Bellow the essayist, with his writings such as "A World Too Much with Us" (1975) and "There is Simply Too Much to Think About" (1992), might appear to cut just such a solipsistic figure, with his impatience with the claims made on his attention by the modern milieu, and his insistence upon the necessity of "a region about every person through which events must make their approach, a space in which they can be received on decent terms, intelligently, comprehensively and contemplatively"; we may note

how the "person" is able to *sit still*, await the courteous overtures of external phenomena, remain within the boundaries set around whatever constitutes his or her discrete consciousness²⁴ His concern for the inviolability of "the personal core, or what we are by nature" is again evident in his recent attack on attempts to have the very notion of it expunged from serious consideration: "what lies behind this drive to revise us is tyranny, [in] that consciousness raising and sensitivity training are meant to force us to be born again without color, without race, sexually neutered, politically purified".²⁵ The anger at the threatened liberation from "error", at the conversion of the self into something as colourless and quantifiable as Ilkington's gin, is evident.

That such a reaction to social and political change involves some willingness to embrace solipsism (if need be) seems plausible. Bonca implies that Bellow's "significant space" derives its significance from its declared difference in relation to the profane "zone", that it requires the environment around it to be so irredeemable as to invalidate any attempt at engagement. But Bellow's fictions demand that the reader must remain skeptical when confronted with categories such as the "sacred" and the "profane"; points of rest, whether retrieved by the Bellovian central character from his "zone" or by the reader from the Bellovian text, are not so much points of *fixity* as they are *provisional* coordinates, spaces in which there can be detected a potential for meaning. For Tony Tanner, *Herzog* (1964) "moves from a corrosive restlessness to a point of temporary rest, and the most important meaning is in that actual movement".²⁶ Tanner rightly stresses the tentative aspect of Bellow's fiction, its reluctance to locate its "meaning" in fixed form within itself; aware of itself as fiction, as a set of (possibly inadequate) terms, it defers to the action of consciousness within and across those terms, acknowledges its limits and locates its true "meaning" *beyond* those limits. As Bellow's central characters negotiate their zones, their mental and physical activities exhibit the influence upon the characters of a gravitational force, "truth", perhaps, external to the zone, and to the "terms" of which the fiction itself is composed. Bellow's novels, although their narratives adhere to the workings of individual consciousnesses folding in upon themselves, abjure solipsism by virtue of their insistent self-effacement, their refusal to fix meaning within their own sets of terms; Bellow's central characters must look *outward*, as does Dr Braun at the conclusion of "The Old System".

Robert F. Kiernan, in attributing a "solipsistic character" to the narrating voice of "The Old System" - "the point of view attends so closely to the drift of Braun's mind that it seems entirely *his* point of view" - neglects the manner in which that point of view ironizes Dr Braun, coldly eyes his physical diminution and passivity.²⁷ Dr Braun, like Isaac, like many of Bellow's central characters, is placed in a "situation of parody" in which his solipsistic tendencies are exposed for what they are. We see Bellow's heroes thinking as machines might, their spirit in a process of mechanical operation (as with Dr Braun's scientist self), the limitations of their thoughts satirically exposed. Bellow's heroes register events, note them, but often fail to interpret them, recognize them for what they are. The typical Bellovian character thinks very quickly but not always very well, his consciousness running for most of the time like a film camera recording at excessive speed, at, for example, forty-eight frames per second. When the workings of that consciousness are replayed for the reader in the frame of fiction, projected onto a screen of narrative, the reader may observe what goes by too quickly for the character to apprehend properly; what is for that character mere "blurred background", in a phrase from *Seize the Day* (1956), acquires definite and distinctive shape for the reader.²⁸ What appears at first glance to be a possibly random accretion of detail, a catalogue of grotesque phenomena from the zone, is organized through Bellow's systematizing narrative into a structure of "meaning", inaccessible to the consciousness on which it is centred. These structures, acting reflexively as ironic indices for the central character in many instances, are demonic heavy influences, threatening to fix that character within "false categories", within the zone, and within the grid of *fiction*. To ignore the presence of these structures, and thus to neglect their overdetermining power, would be to concur with Kiernan's argument, which fails to observe the ironic frames constructed around Bellovian character.

These structures, the satiric substance of Bellow's fiction, are central to this thesis's remit. Dealing with them does involve, however, a reading practice, such as that which I have employed in explicating "The Old System", apparently contrary to Bellow's explicitly stated views on criticism. Bellow the essayist's 1959 piece "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!" begins by citing E.M.

Forster's wariness in advance of an encounter with the "particularly deep readers of his books" at Harvard.²⁹ Bellow contrasts Forster's "lightness of heart" with the lust for hidden meanings displayed by "the serious", for whom, invariably,

things are not what they seem. And anyway, unless they represent something large and worthy, writers will not bother with them. Any deep reader can tell you that picking up a bus transfer is the *reisemotif* (journey motif) when it happens in a novel. A travel folder signifies death. Coal holes represent the underworld. Soda crackers are the host. Three bottles of beer are - its obvious. The busy mind can hardly miss at this game, and every player is a winner.³⁰

Such readings are a "practice of avoidance", demonstrating a tendency to "prefer meaning to feeling".³¹ But it is "only fair to remember that the best novelists and poets of the century have done much to promote it", as with *Ulysses*, in which Joyce's genius "holds all the elements in balance", each detail in that novel being patterned into various strata of significance.³² This thesis's readings of Bellow's novels will endeavour to demonstrate the presence there of similar overdetermining frames of reference, but an important distinction must be made, in that Bellow *takes as his subject matter* the implications of Joyce's modernist method, addresses that particular *mode* of discourse as an *object* of discourse.

Elsewhere, Bellow has described *Ulysses* as being "the modern masterpiece of confusion", a work in which it "sometimes looks as if the power of the mind has been nullified by the volume of experiences", which floods through the consciousness of Leopold Bloom "like an ocean through a sponge".³³ The difference between Bloom's passivity and that of Bellow's central characters is that the latter are rendered passive by the presence of the "deeply readable" as a component of the text itself. Bellow's fictions abound with metonymies which are refracted into metaphors, which are in turn strung together into metonymic patterns, cohering into the shape of a symbolic subtext. It is this "deeply readable" substance which the reader, like the central character, must digest if he or she is not to be digested by it; many of this thesis's quarrels with previous critical works on Bellow are based on the sense in which Bellow's critics tend to get things half-right, observe something at work in the text, but either do not pursue what might be made of it or ignore the ways in which the text has anticipated, and pre-empted, that observation. Bellow states that "a true symbol is substantial, not accidental. You cannot avoid it, you cannot remove it".³⁴ Also, "while our need for meanings is

certainly great our need for concreteness, for particulars, is even greater. We need to see how human beings act after they have appropriated or assimilated the meanings".³⁵ The action of a Bellow novel is that of the central consciousness, an irresistible force, working its way through meanings - through "the debris of false description", to borrow a phrase from *The Dean's December* (1982) - towards the immovable object of the "concrete", although that destination is never quite attainable.³⁶ Thus, the reader must attempt to "read deeply", face up to the challenge of the "false description", and engage in the kind of critical inquiry which Bellow mistrusts. The novels constitute an extension of the skepticism towards metaphor and symbolism expressed in "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!", their satiric structures incorporating into themselves the "deeply readable", while their entireties expose the pernicious and reificatory nature of such "meaning".

John Jacob Clayton finds in *Henderson the Rain King* various parodic patterns of symbolism, "making fun of literary pretentiousness", which expand upon the critique of "deep reading" published earlier in the same year.³⁷ James Dean Young compares the essay to Mark Twain's warning "notice" which prefaces *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ("Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot").³⁸ Young regards "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!" as a pre-emptive strike, designed to prevent *Henderson the Rain King* from being written off "nothing more than a great crashing of symbols, with Meaning triumphing over Feeling".³⁹ The essay is more, however, than a mere coded prefatory note to the novel which it immediately precedes; it makes plain Bellow's awareness of how criticism and literature as practices involve *the vanity of apprehension*, a willingness to be seduced by the satisfaction to be found in the retrieval, or production, of "meaning". The critical "cold eye" aspires to cleanse itself of "feeling", that obstructive accretion, so that the remorseless advance of interpretative activity may proceed efficiently. Bruce J. Borrus writes that, "if heightened self-awareness has resulted in a weakening of natural power, an enfeeblement of instinct and a restriction of freedom, is it possible that the reverse could be true - that a decrease in self-awareness would mean an increase in strength and freedom? I think Bellow might answer in the affirmative".⁴⁰ In "The Old System" and "Deep Readers of the

World, Beware!" we have seen Bellow testing the double-edged blade of "awareness", demonstrating the ability of consciousness to place faith in its own projections, blind to, or antagonistic towards, its own blindnesses. Borrus's question addresses an ambiguity which lies at the core of Bellow's fiction, the way in which his novels construct economies of consciousness, driven by the notion that "awareness", in particular "self-awareness", may constitute in some respects an obstruction to the healthy workings of the soul.

Bellow has claimed that his writing arises in part out of a desire to not "waste people's time. They're gasping for a breath of life and they're being robbed by every con artist who comes along. If I didn't think I was speaking to people's souls, I would not write anything".⁴¹ Bellow's assaults on "con artist" vanities are motivated by his sense of a breathing, listening "soul"; in "The Old System", Isaac Braun's "awareness" of his "self" distracts him from recognizing the state of his soul, until Tina's deathbed stratagem evicts him from the identity which he has constructed for himself, and induces the labour through which that soul is reborn. Dr Braun's "work of wit and feeling" recapitulates this process; for Bellow, narrative involves a working through of the "self", as exhibited by Isaac and Dr Braun, towards an ultimate deference before the "soul". This soul is the "concrete" upon which Bellow's fiction rests. For his characters, estrangement from it entails a coldening of the eye, an ossification of the self, an absorption into the sphere of "false description". Although Bellow does not regard the self as invariably inimical to the soul - indeed, his economies of consciousness insist upon its deployment as a means of defending the soul from other heavy influences - he consistently exposes it as a *system*, and thus ambiguous in its value, being a *fiction* which occurs around the *fact* of the soul.

In its attempts at "deep reading" through Bellow's novels in pursuit of the "concrete", this thesis places itself in danger of being "cold-eyed" (preferring "meaning" to "feeling"), and also promises to share in the risk, inevitable in criticism of Bellow's ironic structures, of being at best only "half-right". But for the Bellow reader, as for the relatives of Tina Braun, metaphor, "meaning", the

"deeply readable", are both poison and cure, and cannot be evaded by any critic hoping to offer a coherent reading of the texts.

2. On *Dangling Man*

Saul Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), provides an exception to the rule, proposed in my introduction, according to which the central characters of his narratives are preserved at the last from dissolution into the parodic contexts which beset them. In this instance, any residual ground which the narrator Joseph (whose journal constitutes the novel) might reclaim from the heavy influences at work around and within him is surrendered as the novel ends. Bellow's style, as it develops through the sequence of novels with which this thesis concerns itself, courts overdetermination, in that dialogue and detail are loaded with "deeply readable" significance, but it is only in *Dangling Man* that this overdetermination dictates the nature of the novel as a whole, occupies all the space available to it. Ihab Hassan complains of "the colorless style and rancid manner of confession" which "insulate" the novel "from the currents of reality; they predetermine our attitude to the material and allow no contrary influence, no enriching substance, to enter in".¹ Sanford Pinsker notes the book's "claustrophobic atmosphere", its "circles constricting inwards" towards "a kind of stalemate".² There is a critical consensus which holds Bellow's debut as a novelist to be a case of trial and error, in which themes and methods which are explored and employed with greater success in his later works are already present, but in unwieldy and jumbled forms. Frank D. McConnell writes that "one senses Bellow's own impatience with his narrative, a kind of sustained malaise at the inadequacy of this very short, relatively allegorical novel fully to bear the weight of the thought which has created it".³ Keith Opdahl observes that Bellow's metaphor of the "*Dangling Man*" "permitted him to include too much, almost all the novels he had in him, in a single book".⁴

The account of *Dangling Man* presented in this chapter takes its cue from the comments of three critics in particular, two of whom depict the novel as a curate's egg from which Bellow's subsequent fiction hatches. Andrew Waterman writes that "Joseph is dismissed to limbo with a flourish of the conventional literary pessimism Bellow later disavowed" ("never again is total failure so nakedly acknowledged" in any of Bellow's endings).⁵ H. Porter Abbott offers the notion that Bellow's writing "goes backwards" in reaction against the impasse arrived at in his first novel, "a book which,

implicitly at least, tells why he cannot be a novelist", in that it is a fiction conscious of fiction's potential for (or, perhaps, *disposition towards*) acting as a heavy influence in itself, as an agent, as well as an observer, of the self's diminishment.⁶ Taking Abbott's observation further, there becomes apparent a kinship of sorts between the dilemma of the Bellow hero - his embarrassment before Bellow's overarching ironies, his existence in words as a kind of subsistence in which he is cruelly opened to "deep reading" - and that of "O" (for "object") in Samuel Beckett's 1964 *Film*, an exploration of (among other things) the vindictive aspect of cinema itself.⁷ Try as "O" (portrayed by Buster Keaton) might, he cannot elude the attentions of "E" (for "eye"), whose field of vision fills the area of the screen, and in whose merciless and insistent gaze converge the "eyes" of Beckett, of the director Alan Schneider, and of the audience. The resemblance here between Bellow and Beckett lies in a common notion, more explicitly present in the latter, of narrative as proceeding at the expense of the character which it holds as its centre, of representation as exploitation. The difference between *Dangling Man* and the novels which follow it is that Bellow, in 1944, is already aware that there is something of the murderous in the novelist's art, that his characters' grounding in words is also a *grinding down* of their claims to substance, but he does not adapt the novel as a consequence of this awareness. The "pessimism" noted by Waterman is markedly present in *Dangling Man's* conception of itself as a dead end for both its central character and its author. The metaphoric strain in Joseph's thinking poisons Joseph without curing him; not for him the kind of rebirth enjoyed by Isaac Braun. In this novel, metaphor and parody are not in any sense means towards liberation, but endings in themselves.

It is perhaps as a result of this closed-in aspect of the text that it proves so responsive to the phenomenological approach taken to it by Lucy L. Melbourne, whose analysis of Joseph's situation and status within Bellow's structure is the third critical precursor to demand recognition. She finds, behind Joseph's narration, an implicit third-person narrative, "an underlying text that grounds his utterances within an encompassing *fictional* context".⁸ Joseph's pictures of himself and his world, his "self-presenting and presentative texts", are revealed as flawed by means of the novel's "intrinsic meaning structure".⁹ Following Melbourne, my attempt to map *Dangling Man's* patterns and

framings concentrates on Bellow's ironies and, in conclusion, Bellow's conception of the value (or otherwise) of such ironies (a line of inquiry which Melbourne declines to pursue). The novel, I will argue, is haunted throughout by a sense of impending closure, an anxiety concerning its own resemblance to its solipsistic central character. Much of the novel takes the shape of an indictment of its narrator, and the reader may well recoil from the sheer weight of damning evidence massed against Joseph; "deeply readable", he is offered up as a sitting (rather than oscillating) target, as being worthy of contempt, Mosbyesque.

2.1 War and Hell

Joseph begins his journal on 15 December 1942. He is without occupation, having thrown in his job at a travel bureau nearly seven months before, and has been stalled since then, relatively immobile, waiting to be drafted into the US Army. This wait has proved to be unexpectedly protracted, as his Canadian prevents him from being inducted "without an investigation".¹⁰ While he records his own "inward transactions" in the journal, investigating his self (or, perhaps, his lack of one), he is also a character in "a bureaucratic comedy trimmed out in red tape" being played out on paper elsewhere as he describes in his diary's first entry:

I was notified that I was in 1A and was told to hold myself ready. Again I waited. Finally, when November came, I began to inquire and found that through a new clause affecting married men my induction had been postponed. I asked for reclassification, pleading that I had been prevented from working. After three weeks of explaining, I was transferred to 3A. But before I could act (in a week, to be accurate), I was summoned for a new blood test (each holds good for only sixty days). And so I was shifted back. (8/9)

"I must know what I myself am", writes Joseph at a later point, but the novel arrives at its end when he forgoes his course of introspective study and sets his journal aside on the eve of his voluntary enlistment, eager as he eventually is to be "in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom cancelled" (99, 159). He gives himself up to the life in which he is categorized as "1A" or "3A", embracing a timetable of "regular hours" (159). But the soldier's life which he anticipates seems to be something of an abstract concept which he has come gradually to see as a cure for his existential malaise. The comedy of classification as quoted above takes place in slow motion, in some distant and impersonal office, with the periodic blood tests as the only hints that this is, after all, a matter of life and death. The realities of war, if not the notion of its horrors seem absent, perhaps indefinitely,

from Joseph's consideration, even as he dreams of combat, notes with sadness the death in battle of an old acquaintance as he reported in the newspaper, and fancies himself a "moral casualty" of the war, wounded by his awareness of the venality and deceit apparently rife in wartime Chicago (14). For Tony Tanner, the novel shows "Joseph's America" very much "fallen under the shadow of Hitler's Europe", with images of apocalypse proliferating through the text.¹¹ But Bellow's ironic structures direct the reader to trace such avatars of war back to their site of origin, which is more in Joseph's mind than in the theatre of war. His journal concentrates on the home front, and he uses the war as a rod on his fellow civilians' decadent backs. Leslie Fiedler notes that "Bellow has realized that for his generation the war itself is an anticlimax (too foreknown from a score of older novels to be really lived), that their real experience is the waiting".¹² But if Bellow is addressing a "foreknowing" audience, then that audience is being attacked, not flattered, its bookish accidia satirized in the vanities of Joseph, who is revealed as the primary source of that shadow which Tanner sees descending on the American scene.

Joseph's journal records the ways in which the terminology of war infiltrates the language of social life, as when his friend Alf Steidler refers to a recent sexual "conquest" as "dynamite", or when Joseph anticipates his own explosion as "a sort of human hand grenade" (123, 122). But Joseph fails to recognize the incongruity of such terms in their new, civilian contexts, and similarly omits to observe the way in which his own favoured vocabulary distorts his environment into a kind of cannibalistic inferno. For example, he looks out from his window on a sky fed by "chimneys, their smoke a lighter grey than the grey of the sky", "above electric signs blankly burning" (20). He sees his fellow citizens as being obsessed with "perishability", building for themselves "an empire of iceboxes" (69). He records that, from his window, "the surrounding roofs - green, raw red blackened brass - shone like potlids in a darkened kitchen", and sees "masses of snow like dirty suds" in the street (88, 130). Chimneys, again, "pointed heavenward in open-mouthed exhaustion" (143). The "ravaged throats of entry halls" swallow and disgorge the tenants of the houses below. These quotations gathered here are deprived of their specific contexts, the last cited, for instance, referring immediately in the text to Joseph's ostensibly humorous vision of "houses, drawing in the freshness"

of spring, "like old drunkards or consumptives taking a cure" (143). But they constitute a pattern of recurrent metaphor, a reflexive vocabulary which betrays Joseph's disposition towards a fevered vision, verging on the hysterical, of the world around him. He seems unaware of this recurrence, while the reader may observe how much of this hellish Chicago scene reflects the pathology of its narrator.

Further, there is a decidedly queasy undercurrent to Joseph's description of others, which pictures them not only as things *cooked*, but also as things *eating*. He notes facial features such as hair, eyes, foreheads frequently, but *mouths* almost invariably. Often these details are set down with a sense of disgust that is almost explicit: a girl's "downy, slightly protuberant lip" found unattractive, the "yellow teeth" revealed by a streetcar conductor's grin found repellent, the lips of a pamphleteering Christian Scientist likened to "the seams of badly sewn baseball" (34, 87, 134). He at first describes the face of his neighbour Mrs Bartlett as having "large, slightly protruding front teeth that lent it a kind of innocence" - "rather prepossessing", in fact (142). But when he looks down from the stairway into "the dark square inlet of the lower hall" he sees, or writes of, her mouth only, as "her teeth shone up at me good-naturedly" (her face having been illuminated previously by "the hot light of the furnace grating" in the cellar; the light by which Joseph sees is given off by the flames which consume, 142/3). Joseph's eye is repeatedly drawn to the lipless grin, a subliminally misanthropic vision. He prefers, it seems, to dine alone; witness his obnoxious behaviour and loss of appetite when eating in the company of his friend Myron Adler, of Iva on their sixth wedding anniversary or, most pointedly, of his brother Amos on Christmas Day (Joseph eventually confronting his wealthy businessman brother with accusations of snobbery - "'try your teeth on that whatsoever!'", 25-31, 96, 60).

Lips that would kiss draw back to reveal the teeth that would rend and divide the flesh. Misanthropy and morbidity are blended in Joseph's image of modern man as slave to his personal, carnivorous "'ideal construction'", Joseph's term, formulated late in the novel, for each man's set of "plans, idealizations" (115/6, 73). Once chosen, these projects "can consume us like parasites, eat us, drink

us, and leave us lifelessly prostrate. And yet we are always inviting the parasite, as if we were eager to be drained and eaten" (73). He sees himself as just such a host, "a chopped and shredded man", as he complains to his imaginary conversational foil, "the Spirit of Alternatives" (Joseph thus bemoaning his inner divisions to a division of himself *made* by himself, 137). A commentary on Joseph's preoccupation with anthropophagy may be gleaned from Bellow's 1949 short fiction "A Sermon by Doctor Pep", a monologue delivered by one of Bellow's charlatan sages, which argues against the "euphemisms of the menu", against squeamishness concerning that which we consume for our sustenance, against guilt-ridden vocabularies in which "a reality is subtracted along the way and something spoiling creeps in".¹³ We "turn our appetite on ourselves", scared into "civilized self-consumption" by our horror of "the eating mouth, the betrayal of mercy in [our] own teeth".¹⁴ It's a monologue which reads as if it might be addressed to Joseph personally, pleading with him to admit that the carnivore is not always a cannibal (Amos, although "kind", "no cannibal", is one of those "accustomed (...) to slaughter", one prepared to "consume" the "benefits" of the war, 68/9). Joseph's inclination, as I will demonstrate later, is to reduce others to what he presumes their "ideal constructions" to be, sees them as consumed, digested, beyond reclamation, supplanted by the parasite itself. His insistently reductive vision sees that "eating mouth" in all around him.

Bellow's satirized consciousnesses tend to define themselves *against* their environment, in opposition to their chosen anathemas, while Bellow is busy defining these consciousnesses through that which they believe they reject, revealing them as variations on their most detested themes. One of Joseph's professed preoccupations is the contemporary predominance in life and letters of "the hard-boiled", the Hemingway code of stoic style against which he rails in the journal's first entry. Its advocates promote "an inhibitory effect" on "the truest candour": "if you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments. To hell with that!" (7). He derides the code as "an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman", but he is himself "a British subject", implying that "the code of the athlete, of the tough boy" is a component of his origin as well as of his inheritance (7/8). His rejection of the cult of "close-mouthed straightforwardness" is further undermined by the way in which Bellow shows him to be as much a proponent of it as is anyone else,

in his closing declarations of enthusiasm for "the supervision of the spirit" (159). With his preparatory manifesto, Joseph unwittingly brings into play a strain of metaphor that has a strong, secret allure for him, one that will eventually turn on and devour him. Bearing in mind the more literal sense of the "hard-boiled", we may observe Joseph's recognition that, to the "tough boy", the practice of journal-keeping is "in poor *taste*"; the "*cooking* odours" which are part of the "rooming-house annoyances" which we must tolerate; his fear that he is "storing bitterness and spite which *eat* like acids at my endowment of generosity and good will" (emphasis mine, 7, 8, 10). Towards the novel's end, he studies the features of a neighbour fallen terminally ill: "Mrs Keifer's cheeks were collapsed and her face was moist. It reminded me of a loaf, before the baker puts it in the oven, smeared *with white of egg*" (emphasis mine, 142/3). He leaves the room quickly, but the next day sees his own room full of sunlight "yellow as an egg is of yolk" (144). These images are in themselves unpleasant enough, in their respective suggestions of Mrs Keifer prepared for the oven and of sunlight as a viscous medium, but, when related back to the novel's other metaphoric flashes of Chicago as hell's kitchen, they emerge as the conclusion of a series which shows Joseph being subsumed by the terms of his own argument. He begins by dismissing the "hard-boiled" code to "hell", but he himself *follows* it there. Implicit in the cumulative metaphor of the "hard-boiled" is an image of Joseph sealed within the shell of the egg itself.

Sealing himself off from the world, Joseph recoils from growth, from the regenerative cycles of nature, as when he warns spring flowers to "go back, you don't know what you're getting into" (141). He is preoccupied with waste, with the rind, rather than the flesh, of the fruit, as when he employs a handful of orange peel as a missile with which to chase away the Spirit of Alternatives, or reads with pleasure a letter from his friend John Pearl which describes New York's "peeling environment": "peeling furniture, peeling walls, posters, bridges, everything is peeling and scaling in South Brooklyn" (117, 126/7). Joseph is heartened by this echo of his own pessimism: "such a letter buoys me up. It gives me a sense of someone else's recognition of the difficult, the sorrowful, in what to others is merely neutral, the environment" (127). But this "recognition" of which he

writes is also a projection on the part of himself and Pearl (the latter being an artist working, notably, in advertising, in the manufacture of didactic images).

Taking refuge in his "recognitions", Joseph's behaviour when finally confronted with a "war" of sorts reveals how reluctant he is to engage in action when a moral imperative to do so presents itself. In mid-January we first learn of Joseph's wife Iva's friend Susie Farson and her husband Walter, who has "bruised" Susie's face, and has been assaulting their baby daughter: "recently Iva indignantly wanted me to punch his head for gagging the child with a handkerchief because she disturbed his sleep", writes Joseph (93/4). Walter is a monstrously hardboiled parent who demands silent deference from his family; on another occasion he has "pressed" his daughter's "jaws together for the same reason, almost suffocating her" (93/4). But Joseph, although hardly averse to the use of force (witness his attacks on his landlord Gesell and his niece Etta, 121, 58), declines to intervene here on behalf of the woman and child terrorized by the "ruddy, big-jawed, blond Dakota boy" Walter, an Aryan thug with a job lined up in an aircraft factory (fittingly enough for a "Dakota" man). Iva urges action on behalf of the truly "wretched", but Joseph distances himself from the situation - "I withdrew and left them to talk" (93). His dream of possessing as many mouths with which to speak "as Siva has arms" admits of no responsibility towards others, no commitment to action which would defend *their* ability to speak, the Farsons' daughter being denied the use of the single voice with which she was born (7). And Joseph is drawn into a kinship with Walter Farson when, the day after the last in a series of arguments with Iva, Joseph sees "a blemish on her face that always shows up when she is disturbed" (153). This is not only an echo of Susie's bruises, but a "shadow" cast by Joseph upon Iva's face, and a punctuation mark, of sorts, reflecting back to him the depths to which he has sunk. *Dangling Man* is, in one sense, structured as a marriage debate, with Iva as its central figure, a figure towards whom this reading of the novel moves; but, before we approach what might be named as the "heart" of the matter, we should attend to Joseph's, and Bellow's, conceptions of self and other.

2.2 Self and Other

There are indications that Joseph's deepest anxiety might concern a threatened congruence of his self with his environment, which would render unattainable any kind of separate peace. Disillusioned with his circle of friends, he sees in them the ascendancy of the "nasty, brutish, short", regards them as conspirators in "many treasons" which "were a medium, like air, like water; they passed in and out of you (...); nothing was impenetrable to them" (46). He fears his self to be porous, passive, at the mercy of these ghostly forces. He witnesses their presence at its most virulent at a party thrown by Minna and Harry Servatius, nine months before the journal's beginning, recounted in one of its earliest entries, and seen as the spur to his withdrawal from social life, as it "forced on my attention certain defects in the people around me" which he had not been sufficiently "astute" to apprehend previously (32). But the sordid intrigues of his friends are also reflections of his own defects, and his first-person narratorial integrity is subverted by the nature of the tale as he tells it.

Joseph and Iva (the latter "insisted, out of loyalty to Minna" that they attend, despite Joseph's reluctance) are the last to arrive at the party (33). Minna greets them at the door with the accusation - pertinent to Joseph's subsequent behaviour - that "they come when everybody's high so they can stand around and watch us make fools of ourselves" (33/4). Minna's husband is openly devoting his attention to another woman, in the face of his wife's evident distress, and the marriage appears to be under a general strain. Joseph is in the kitchen talking with Morris Abt, a former fiancé of Minna's, when they hear her shrill laughter, "almost an outcry", in the hall (37). When Joseph voices his concern - he wishes that "something could be done" - and Abt concurs - she's "having a bad time" - Joseph is "reassured", rather than perturbed, to find his suspicions confirmed (38). Minna persuades Abt to hypnotize her, as a macabre party piece, seeming eager for the mesmeric leash. Joseph watches with avowed distaste as Abt humiliates her in her trance, subjecting her to a series of minor tortures, making her feel cold despite the warmth of the room, pinching her hand with force, rendering her arm motionless and then ordering her to raise it (42/3). In his pitiless relish for power, Abt resembles Joseph in the latter's fits of aggression, but Joseph is figuratively linked also with the victim Minna. She has commentated - as has Joseph - on the progress (or otherwise) of the party,

observing that Joseph and Abt are "always in a corner together"; totters about "as if in danger of falling from her high heels", one of which comes unfastened later, linking her with Joseph's own condition of "dangling" above reality; and, in her trance, appears as an analogy for Joseph's passivity unto solipsism (38, 35). At one point he chastises her for an impolite remark - "Minna!" - to which complaint she offers the retort "Minna yourself!" (39). Joseph ignores these subtle intimations of a common predicament, pays no mind to her valid criticisms of his behaviour, and rather than treat her as a friend seems to conceive of her already as the sort of "generalized human being" he beholds with fascination in her hypnotized form.

But if Joseph shares in Minna's victimhood, he is more profoundly akin to the sadistic Abt, once his college roommate, now a pamphleteer and "political philosopher" of sorts (36, 71/2). Joseph's aggression manifests itself in his depictions of his friends as creatures of folded paper; an electric light gives Abt's face "the look of a sheet of thick paper, artfully folded at the eye and pierced, high on the forehead, by straight, black hairs" (41). As for Minna, "her face was white, her forehead full of creases" as she opens the door to her guests, and Joseph notes her eyes "creased" under hypnosis (33, 43). Joseph reduces his friends to characters *of*, as well as *on*, paper. If his habitual self-deceptions amount to a chronic condition of self-imposed hypnosis, then his perceptions are more properly seen as projections, a subjugation of phenomena before the rule of his inner trance.

The partygoer to whom Joseph is most drawn is a minor demon named Jack Brill, a self-professed outsider from the social circle, who supposes that he is present only because "it interests me to watch you carry on" (45). "He seemed to relish watching us", Joseph notes after Brill, "smiling broadly", has encouraged the scene between Abt and Minna to develop, becoming in effect the impresario behind the sideshow, who clears the room when its end is signalled by Minna's hysterics, and then polices the door; "what a wow of a finish" is his comment on her tears (45, 42, 39, 44). Brill explains to Joseph that he finds his fellow guests "cold": "you people all seem satisfied to settle down to a long life of taking in each other's laundry. Everybody else is shut out. It's offensive to people like me" (45). Joseph has observed that "back of his smile there was a resentful and inimical

coldness", but does not resist the allure of Brill's contemptuous hauteur (40). Joseph shakes his hand before parting, impressed by his stance of cool detachment, sensing a kinship between Brill's cynicism and his own disillusion. The claims on Joseph's friendship made implicitly by Abt and Minna, accentuated by Bellow's incorporation of common details into their portraits, are rebuffed. When writing of the party, Joseph cites it as a betrayal of his younger self's hopes for "a 'colony of the spirit'" among his friends, "a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness and cruelty", but in following Brill's lead, in hoping to retreat from such ugliness to the position of a disinterested observer (in truth an agent of the iniquity he aspires to avoid), Joseph isolates himself with his own dirty "'laundry'" (32). As Brill is complaining to Joseph of being "'shut out'", he is standing before the door closed between Joseph and Minna, advocating the denial of obligation and engagement (45).

The particularly Bellovian quirk here is that Bellow's characters are never, unless quite without hope, static and integrated wholes, but caught in a double flux, themselves whirling through identities and conditions while their environment, which here includes other characters, whirls around, and *through*, them. Joseph's project is to define himself as being apart from others, but these others constitute not only his inescapable context but also much of his substance. If we conceive of *Dangling Man* as a square, then we can see within it "character" as a system of intersecting circles. Of course, the area of the circle "Joseph" is not congruent with that of its box, the novel itself; indeed, the dramatic action of the novel may be described as the contraction of that circle towards a point. The condition of character in Bellow's novels might be seen as a Venn diagram, in which the selves of individual characters retain their contours while intersecting with the selves of others. Bellow illustrates these intersections by means of recurring tropes, filtered through the consciousness of the central character, stressing the gravitational play between the circles, the magnetic influences exerted on, and by, that consciousness. This is why Irving Malin is half-right when he argues that Joseph "wants desperately to see himself" in others, "wants them, moreover, to mirror his plight"; half-right because, as "others become an abstraction" for Joseph, he becomes an abstraction himself, receding from a "real" world (or one at least with a potential for meaning) into a reified domain made up of motifs centred on himself rather than on correspondences relating him to others.¹⁵

"Himself" and "his plight", "mirrored" everywhere, become everything, and therefore nothing. In Bellow's scheme, Joseph can justifiably "see himself" in others, but Joseph retreats from this recognition that he is not simply reflected by others but present in them, as they are in him, in various modalities.

Characters in *Dangling Man* may be said to be "real" insofar as they are capable of interacting with, and acting as indices of, each other. Joseph's flight from interaction and from recognition leads him towards an unreality akin to that which he attributes to Abt and Minna. At the journal's beginning, he indulges in a little smug irony, writing that he is seen as being unwilling to work because "I have no resources - in a word, no character", a comment which emerges as being more literally true than it is sardonic (10). As his consciousness shrinks from his "roommates", Joseph is confronted not with other "characters" but with himself and himself only, in the guise of doubles such as Brill, his neighbour Vanaker, and the Christian Scientist he encounters towards the novel's end. If other characters might have existed for Joseph as *windows* - granting insight into the nature of existence, while simultaneously giving back a faint reflection of the observer - then these doubles are mere *mirrors*, drawn with revulsion, thin of substance; Joseph having written off his contemporaries and neglected his friends, reductive versions of himself materialize from his chosen Chicago to show what has become of him.

Vanaker is the most comical of Joseph's doubles, as their congruence is more bathetic than it is sinister or tragic. Vanaker *literally* airs his dirty linen in public, and pilfers items from Joseph's apartment, most notably his socks, the two thus involved in "'taking in each other's laundry'". While Joseph's imagination draws Chicago as an inferno, Vanaker *literally* starts a fire in his room (25, 104, 126, 65). Where Joseph is fastidious about his bodily wastes, Vanaker retches and urinates loudly, disgusting his neighbours with the "fleshy catch" of his coughing (13, 65, 96, 142, 149). It's in association with "waste" that the dissipated Vanaker is most closely modelled on Joseph; after use, the stolen items are discarded into the yard below Vanaker's window, converting the "laundry" into garbage and the world outside his room into a junkyard (48, 65). Once Vanaker has moved out,

Joseph examines the detritus ("an interesting lot of goods") in the vacated room, himself now in the midst of his neighbour's waste (156). Vanaker is expulsive where Joseph professes himself to be retentive, and inarticulate almost to the point of aphasia in contrast to Joseph, but both are selves unravelling, as figured in their neglected apparel - witness Vanaker's appearances in the house's corridors clad "in his pyjama trousers only", and Joseph's clothes with their loosening buttons (mimicking his increasing "dishevelment of mind", 14, 90, 30). Vanaker is a model of antisocial behaviour which Joseph conforms to and eventually exceeds, through acts of aggression rather than through furtive acts of theft. When Joseph finally confronts Vanaker, it is at night, in the hallway bathroom where the old man is reduced to something like the narrator's shadow (Joseph "advanced on his silhouette", cornering him in "the semi-dark" where his head is seen as "a long blob of shadow in the pewter glass of the mirror", 149/50). Joseph causes the sort of disturbance of which he accuses his victim ("raising as much hell as you please") while Mrs Keifer lies dying downstairs, until he is distracted by the arrival of (military) authority in the shape of another neighbour, Captain Briggs, whom Joseph provokes towards violence. Vanaker exits this scene as a double no more, his capacity to mirror adequately Joseph's disintegration exhausted by the increasingly sociopathic edge to the latter's actions.

A more tragic double for Joseph is found in the Christian Scientist who paces the streets, dispensing religious tracts, a vendor rather than author of pamphlets. Joseph registers her "thin chapped lips, square yellow teeth, recessed brown eyes which you vainly read and re-read for a meaning", and the sickness with which "her face burns and *wastes* under your eyes; the very hairs at the corners of her mouth seem already to have shrivelled (emphasis mine, 133/4). Her appearance merges in one body both Joseph and his Chicago, his impending enlistment prefigured in a scar "that resembles an old bullet wound" on her brow, her skin "the colour of brick dust" (134). Joseph's recent fever is echoed in her "grimly sick" face: "though her eyes retained their hard brown centres, the whites had lost their moisture and, in each, a dry steak of vein had appeared", desiccated by the flames of the inferno. Joseph evinces an almost hallucinatory eye for detail, a perspicacity of vision that clings to the surfaces of things, but lacks any accompanying insight. He sees the Christian Scientist as a

manifestation of death-in-life, but fails to see how closely his description of her resembles a self-portrait. Most pointedly, she stands in the text as a summation of and rebuttal to Joseph's consistent religious misprisions, his thralldom to a way of thinking which informs his apocalyptic vocabulary but fails to provide him with a sense of social and moral reality. In the earlier parts of the journal he cuts a rather prophetic figure, Biblically severe in his postures and judgments. Recording his chastisement of Etta, he writes himself into the viewpoint of Isaiah in his misogynist diatribe against the "daughters of Zion", with their "stretched forth necks and wanton eyes" (50). The scene is a comic overflow of fire and brimstone, Joseph reacting violently to his niece's reasonable, if impolite, request that he allow her a turn at the record player on which he is listening to Haydn. "I thank God, child that you are, that you have no power over me", he rants, while Etta taunts him with insults which mark him as one at the lowest level of her society, as a "no-account", one of those "beggars [who] can't be choosers" (57/8). Joseph, sooner the angry prophet than the penurious holy fool, disrupts the feast by administering a spanking: "seizing her by the hair fiercely, I snapped her head back; her outcry never left her throat" (another "outcry", as from Minna and the Farsons' daughter, that he would prefer to go unheard, 58). "Determined that she should be punished", he is indignant at the arrival on the scene of Etta's parents, Amos and Dolly, with Iva, who find him seated by the piano with Etta over his knee, "her long hair reaching nearly to the floor and her round, nubile thighs bare (...) in my lap" (58). Etta complains that he attacked her, an allegation by which, "in the name of God" once more, he is genuinely shocked. Iva comes "into the sphere" of his "anger" by her failure to defend him, and he berates her for her lack of "faith" in him (although he himself, we learn later, has been an *unfaithful* husband, 59, 61).

While listening to Haydn, and contemplating the God "named" by the music as its sole "source", Joseph concludes that religious belief holds no solution to his dilemmas, as any such answer would be "anterior, not of my own deriving" (56). Yet, even if a leap of faith is beyond or beneath him, "I was not so full of pride that I could not accept the existence of something greater than myself, something, perhaps, of which I was an idea, or merely a fraction of an idea". Keith Opdahl sees "the beginning of a religious intuition" in Joseph, a nascent belief that "the material world is not

absolutely real", but this "intuition", I would argue, occludes from Joseph's vision the "something greater" most immediately at hand, the social context from which he is recoiling.¹⁶ In the absence of proofs of God's existence, Joseph sets himself up as the arbiter of divine judgment, a prophet without faith, as exhibited in his expressions of disfavour concerning Dolly ("no angel", "farther on the hellward side"), the tailor Fanzel (and his fear of poverty, or rather, of "the devil, who is so far among the foremost as to have doubled his trail"), and Gesell ("why the devil", demands Joseph, is he so inconsiderate a landlord?, 64, 91, 120). Joseph consciously declines the prospect of salvation, but the apparent probability of damnation has a firmer hold on his mind. An American Jonah, he sits in his brother's house under a ceiling which "had become a screen for the accidental motions of the greenish street beyond, and across half its width was thrown intact a reflection of the Venetian blind, like the ribs of some immemorial fish"; and one morning he spends an hour at home in bed, "watching the slats of the blind wheeling on the upper wall" (54, 87). As Joseph refers repeatedly to "floods" - of cold wind, of death, of Iva's tears - it can be seen that his separate peace has been achieved insofar as he is sealed within the belly of Jonah's fish, removed from God and from his fellow man, behind the "blinds" (87, 138, 149). The doctrine offered by Christian Science, by the last of Joseph's doubles, is one of immunity through faith, and is another kind of shielding belly wall, a personal peace won at a price. The Christian Scientist, "burning with a double fever", intimates through her visible disintegration that, although one may preserve oneself from a "flood of death", from drowning, one may still frazzle away towards extinction in a private inferno (134).

2.3 *Sex and Text*

Joseph lives and writes as if obsessed with preserving his distance from his profane environment, wary of giving his self away through involvement in society and in sexuality, preferring instead an immersion in words, in the textual. An indirect proof of this is to be found in the motif of the envelope, that fold of paper which both conceals and preserves written communication. Joseph describes a trip to Woolworth's to buy some envelopes as being one of the optional projects for the average dangling day, but clearly he does not take this option at all frequently (11). On Christmas Eve, he comments on the shortage of envelopes in the flat: Iva "put in a supply of cards a week ago

but she forgot to buy envelopes" (48). The couple's "end of the amenities", sending joint replies to greetings cards which they have jointly received, is neglected because Joseph doesn't find it "worth the bother". He enters a shop on 13 January and thinks of buying some envelopes, but invests in some chocolate creams instead (88). He recalls from his childhood how his Aunt Dina once had his hair cut short, presenting the shorn curls to his shocked mother in an envelope (62). This envelope is associated in Joseph's memory with the picture of his grandfather beside which it lay in a drawer, his ancestor's hairless skull impressing on the adolescent Joseph the immanence in his own features of decay and death.

It is this last detail which directs us to see how Bellow uses the envelope as a cumulative figure for Joseph's flight from dialogue, indicative of how communication is conceived of by Joseph as a paring away of one's essence. At one point he jokingly remarks to Iva that, "by rights", he ought to bury his nail clippings, his "hair, all cuttings and waste from the body", in case Vanaker acquires them for the purpose of "sorcery" (77). Via the image of the envelope of curls, one can see how Joseph associates writing with the division of his self, thinks of his journal entries as precious "waste" akin to the bodily detritus coveted by sorcerers, material to be guarded jealously from others. His reluctance to engage in conversation is of a piece with his covert conception of writing; although he claims to be in rebellion against a code of silence, he does not speak with Iva - "she has a way about her that discourages talk. We no longer confide in each other" (9). When he is snubbed by Jimmy Burns, a member of the Communist Party which Joseph himself left some time ago, he complains of it to his friend Myron Adler: "Forbid one man to talk to another, forbid him to communicate with someone else, and you've forbidden him to think, because, as a great many writers will tell you, thought is a kind of communication" (27). But after confronting Burns and demanding recognition, Joseph cannot bring himself to explain his deeper, and less high-minded, motives for causing a scene: "it originated in sheer dishevelment of mind. But how could I explain this to Myron without becoming entangled in a long description of the state I was in and its causes?" (30). Or, as he then puts it, a little more succinctly: "why bother?". His thoughts, his writing, are best kept sealed up, concealed, preserved.

This refusal of dialogue allows the *textual* to supplant the *actual*, Bellow's irony asserting the ascendancy of the former over the latter. "Raising the window, I test the weather; opening the paper, I admit the world", he writes of his morning ritual, in fact a turning from the world towards words (12). His reading of the newspaper is cyclic, his inspection of "the serious news and columnists" bracketed by cartoons and advertisements (11/12). He implies that his scrupulous examination of the paper's most trivial pages is proof of his omnivorous intellectual appetites, but there is evident relish in his catalogue of the features and funny pages, contrasting with his passing mention of the paper's weightier opinion and editorial content. His list of the paper's subsections might serve as a set of subheadings for an essay on the themes and motifs of *Dangling Man* itself - "recipes", "society news", "ads", "the family page", and, as we shall see later, "children's puzzles" and "obituaries". These categories colonize Joseph's epistemology, reifying his experiences into a sort of *paper life*.

Thus, his newfound dislike of Dolly is taken as "additional proof of my inability to read people properly" (emphasis mine; 64). When Iva searches for the copy of *Dubliners* that Joseph has lent to his ex-mistress Kitty, "the missing book reminded me that I had not seen her for some weeks", as if it stands for Kitty in his mind (84). He looks out on Chicago and sees "ruins before my eyes, sodden, themselves the colour of the fateful paper that I read daily", his perception of the world bleaching to the hue of his newspaper, as the paper life begins to envelop the reality on which it feeds (we have already noted Joseph's conversion of Abt and Minna into origami, 21). Joseph finds a lack of distinctions to be made between the world and its "journals" - his own, and those of others - and draws pessimistic conclusions.

Joseph reads little apart from the "fateful" paper - a little of Goethe near the journal's beginning, but he puts that book down "deeply disappointed" (15). It is Iva, who works in a library, who brings him books "in the hope that I will use them" (8). It is a vain hope; there might be read here an implicit pun that Joseph has become too much of a "journalist" to read widely or well. This situation places Joseph in the role of the reluctantly literate child, whereas he himself once tried to have Iva "guided,

formed" by his tastes, and was in the habit of attempting to "teach" Iva, through literature, "to prize the most truly human traditions, the heavenly cities" (80). He muses on what he sees as the abeyance of women before "such things as clothes, appearances, furniture, light entertainment" and other works of the devil:

women - thus I reasoned - were not equipped by *training* to resist such things. You might *force* them to read Jacob Boehme for ten years without diminishing their appetite for them; you might *teach* them to admire *Walden* but never *convert* them to wearing old clothes. (emphases mine, 81)

And you can lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her think. Joseph's thoughts on women tend to veer into platitude, as if he were eager to take refuge from them in his own conceits. When extricating himself from his affair with Kitty, he stumbles in his attempts to explain how "a man must accept limits (...). In many ways I was reluctant ... I ... was not the kind who could keep too many irons in the fire, she finished for me good-naturedly" (83/4). Kitty summarizes his argument with the cliché it merits, speaks for him his unspoken conclusion (the image also treats sex as a matter of "irons" and "fire", feeding into the stratum of infernal imagery), the euphemistic turn of phrase prompting us to ask whether it is Kitty from whom Joseph shrinks - one iron fewer in the fire - or from the fire itself. And as he watches the maid Marie clean the windows of his room, Joseph notes how "very simple, very human" it is "to make a dirty surface clean": "a woman learns it in the kitchens of her childhood, and it branches out from sinks, windows, table tops, to the faces and hands of children, and then it may become, as it does for some women, part of the nature of God" (93). The most striking aspect of this is not Joseph's gender-specific tale of cleanliness growing nearer to Godliness, but the ironic figure of Marie wiping dust from windows while all we ever read of Joseph cleaning is *shoes*, implicitly preferring his reflection in the toe-caps to an unobstructed view of the world outside (69/70).

Returning to specific instances of the sexual overtaken by the textual, we should look more closely at the passage in which Joseph goes to Kitty's apartment to retrieve the copy of *Dubliners*. Having found her to be entertaining a new lover, he descends the staircase, book in hand, through a pastiche of Joycean epiphany: he observes, "through the open bar of the doorway, a woman in a slip", a "vestibule, with its ageless, nameless, rooming-house hangings", noting within it "the brass nipples

of call bells" and a "bronze Laocoon" ("in his suffering hands a huge, barbarically furred headpiece of a lampshade with fringes of blackened lace", 85/6). He hears voices from around the house "raised in argument or lowered in appeasement or persuasion, singing popular songs" ("The Chattanooga Choochoo", suggestively enough), "chiming telephones", "the janitor's booming radio". He leaves this sensual and conversational domain feeling "ambiguously resentful and insulted", the characteristic condition of Joyce's Dubliner, as if Joseph walks here in the shoes of Mr James Duffy, the "outcast from life's feast" in "A Painful Case".¹⁷ Given Bellow's skepticism, cited earlier, regarding the uses made by Joyce of his genius - his nullification, as Bellow sees it, of the "power of mind" - it seems that Joseph is being *punished* here, guyed, moving in a very "literary" space, one that takes as its model not life, but Joyce. Robert R. Dutton writes that Joseph returns home through "a setting that symbolically reinforces the discovered world of reality with which he has just been confronted", but more to the point is the dislocation of Joseph's point of view into pastiche, his environment illuminated with a secondhand twilight: *Dubliners* turns out to be literally and metaphorically all that he has given in, and taken from, his affair with Kitty.¹⁸

At an extreme, Bellow appears to depict Joseph's sexual inclinations as being akin to those of a necrophiliac, attracted to the passive and to the deathly. Gazing at the hypnotized Minna, Joseph dwells on "how narrow and bony her wrists were and the mole between two branches of a vein on her forearm" (42). His stare indulges itself while he professes distaste at the spectacle: "for all the width of her hips, and the feminine prominences, her knees under the dress, her bosom, the meeting of her throat and collar-bones, she looked less specifically like a woman than a more generalized human being - and a sad one, at that". An erotic fascination pervades his observation of how "her bare heel (...) grazed my trouser leg (42). I had an impulse to touch the mole on her arm with my finger" (43). Leaving the party, Joseph helps the drunken Iva into a taxi: "when we stopped at an intersection I looked down at her shadowed face. The yellow traffic light fell on her temple, where I saw a single vein near the surface of the skin, crooking with the slight groove of the bone. I responded to this almost as I had to Minna on the couch" (45). This eye for anatomical detail contrasts with the way Joseph describes (or neglects to describe) Iva once he has put her to bed: "she lay on the blankets,

naked, shielding her eyes from the light with her wrist. I turned off the switch and in the dark took off my own clothes" (46). Details and particulars are edited out, Iva naked appearing to be something of a "generalized human being".

When Joseph mentions, towards the novel's end, "the paper that lies scrambled over the bed", the textual has fully supplanted the sexual (141). It is the conclusion of a series of hints to the effect that Joseph is in flight from sexuality; note his complaint concerning the "avidity" of sexual appetite, or his habit of forcing books on women (Etta as well as Iva and Kitty), or the sensation of his head being "gorged" with blood as Kitty seduces him, an association of sex with the grisliness of consumption (83, 50, 82/3). Early in his marriage, Joseph was "forever buying new books, faster, admittedly, than I could read them"; they were proofs of that "extended life, far more precious and necessary than the one I was forced to lead daily", that is, "more precious and necessary" than his new wife, although he is then together with her in "a flat of our own" (8). "If it was impossible to sustain this superior life at all times, I could at least keep its signs within reach. When it becomes tenuous I could see them and touch them", writes Joseph, exhibiting a devotion to books as sensual objects, security blankets, things to be held rather than read (8). These tropes which figure Joseph as a man repulsed by sexuality contribute to the context which frames the centre of Bellow's novel, the marriage debate which draws our attention to Iva, the book's effaced central figure, central despite Joseph's best efforts to marginalize her in his life and in his journal.

Joseph is consistently loth to admit that Iva is more than an adjunct of himself.¹⁹ He is reluctant to discuss her with Amos; refers to her as "my wife" to Jack Brill, until prompted to call her by her name; and cannot even *allude* to her verbally when reclaiming the copy of *Dubliners* from Kitty: "I have to have the book. It isn't mine, you see ... 'It's Iva's?' - I nodded" (53, 44, 85). He resents her family, dreads leaving her with them on his enlistment, because he loves her "too much to turn her over to them", as though she were his prisoner of war (in echo of Walter Farson's rule over his wife and daughter, 97). He forgets Valentine's Day - one of "a pair of perfect blanks punched out of the calendar" - although he has noticed some "comic valentines" in a shop on 13 January (125, 88). But

he does write lovingly of Iva when she brings him "a treat" of sugared strawberries when he is confined by illness to his bed (98). This, it seems, is Iva at "her most ample and generous best", that is, bringing him something for his sweet tooth and then reading to him, *mothering* him. He reserves his deepest love for Iva asleep; waking beside her, "I (...) heard the slight, mixed rhythm of her breathing and mine. This endeared her to me more than any favour could", he writes, pledging his troth to the somnolent, to the barely animate (98).

His disregard for her is plain in their conversations and confrontations. She complains, tellingly, that "'lately, for all you care, I might just as well not be here'", and Joseph, having "no more patience" with such "'foolishness'", runs from the room, ranting "'damn the house'", the damning of the house being of course his undeclared work in progress (77/8). In their final argument, he claims that Iva, as the "'breadwinner'", resents his idleness (148). Her denials count for nothing, as Joseph knows her better than she knows herself: "you aren't aware of it yourself, Iva". He complains of being left with "'half a dozen orders'" each day, again betraying a conception of the roles of husband and wife as variations on those of gaoler and prisoner. He cares little for her tears: "'It's easy for you to cry. But what can I do?'" (149). He at last reduces their dialogue to the level of Vanaker's retchings; Iva's sobbing "ended in a grotesque sound brought up from her throat. She rolled over on the bed and concealed her face from me" (149). Rushing out into the street after the ensuing confrontation with Vanaker, Joseph looks up to his window in search of "Iva's shadow on the blind", but even that is lost to him now (152). "It occurred to me that the reason I could not see her was that she was lying on the bed again. My skin was suddenly (...) wet with perspiration", as he apprehends what he has done, of how their room, their bed, and Iva's face - even a secondhand image of the latter cast upon the screen of his "blind"-ness - are closed to him.

Joseph's marriage founders in part on his immaturity, the sense in which he "'never grew up'" (the flaw he finds in Iva's mother, 17). His apocalyptic visions are informed by his childhood experiences in Montreal, where he witnessed - from his window, of course - "the sight of a driver trying to raise his fallen horse, of a funeral passing through the snow" (70). He recalls "the beggars with sores and

deformities whose like I was not to meet again until I was old enough to read of Villon's Paris" (70). In Chicago, the adult Joseph is still a child at a window. Details which place him as a child proliferate: his guilt at being "abroad, idle, in the middle of the day" has been perhaps "carried over from my schooldays"; as previously noted, he is drawn to comic strips, uses books as comforters, appreciates Iva most as a mother-figure; and tells the Spirit of Alternatives - his *imaginary friend* - that in time of war "I have to take my risks for survival as I did formerly against childhood diseases and all the dangers and accidents through which I nevertheless managed to become Joseph", as if the war itself were an avatar of polio (11, 139). Elsewhere, Joseph plays along with a child's war game, resolves to enlist as he stands in a schoolyard, and is medically inspected in a gymnasium (88/9, 152, 156). He resents wearing hand-me-down clothes given to him by big brother Amos (49). A bank manager addresses him curtly by his first name, as though he were "an immigrant or a young boy or a Negro" (he is literally the first of these, as a Canadian, and metaphorically the second, 145). He writes that he had impressed Iva's parents with an initial "appearance of maturity" - a seventeen-year-old smoking a cigar - and that her mother at first took him for a "grown man" in lecherous pursuit of her young daughter (22). But Joseph sets himself apart from his younger self who, superficially at least, appears more mature than the diarist descendant who condescends to him.

Just before the novel's end, Joseph returns to his old room in his parent's house, where, amid the "fixtures of my youth", he is "suddenly given (...) to one of those consummating glimpses that come to all of us periodically", as if to project him headlong from his prolonged adolescence into adulthood (158). This "consummating" - consuming, conjoining, concluding - epiphany, the sexual connotations of the adjective stressing the rarefied aspect of such fulfilment, prompts him toward self-awareness: "I had not done well alone".

Such reality [as the room in which he sits], I thought, is actually dangerous, very treacherous. It should not be trusted. (...) there was an element of treason to common sense in the very objects of common sense. Or that there was no trusting them, save through wide agreement, and that my separation from such agreement had brought me perilously far from the necessary trust, auxiliary to all sanity. (158)

Thus, if one suspects oneself to be chained in Plato's cave, then one should not mock the shadows playing on the wall, as they may be signs of a hidden substance, a substance that becomes evident only once it, along with its shadow - as with Iva's - has been lost.

Things for Joseph are now "out of my hands", and therefore, *beyond writing*; grateful that he is "no longer to be held accountable", happy to be "in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom cancelled", Joseph surrenders his journal, and his voice, in his closing declarations of dependence: "Hurrah for regular hours! - And for the supervision of the spirit! - Long live regimentation!" (158/9). His hope is not for an escape from his self-made prison, but for a transfer to another, built and maintained by "other hands". He plunges from solipsism towards submission, as if to evade the solution to the "children's puzzle" of his life "alone" - his self's "obituary", its consumption, "chopped and shredded", by his vanities.

* * *

Joseph's abjection before the cumulative reflexive weight of his vocabulary, his inability to use it to extricate his environment from the sphere of his obsessions, recapitulates the crisis explored by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his autobiographical piece of 1936, "The Crack-Up". Writing, in a journal form of sorts (consisting of three dated sections), in defiance of those "to whom all self-revelation is contemptible", Fitzgerald describes in the third person his "realization that what he had before him was not the dish that he had ordered for his forties. In fact - since he and the dish were one, he described himself as a cracked plate".²⁰ Like Joseph, Fitzgerald arrives at a state in which he cannot distinguish between himself and what he consumes, a solipsistic auto-cannibalism. Out walking one day, Joseph sees (but does not apprehend) an analogy for this condition, in the form of an advertisement: atop a restaurant, "a hamburger with arms and legs balanced on a fiery wire, leaned towards a jar of mustard", preparing its own demise with relish, as it were (88).

Fitzgerald complains of a congruence between what he sees and the way in which he sees it, having developed "a sad attitude towards sadness, a melancholy attitude towards melancholy, and a tragic attitude towards tragedy".²¹ E.M. Cioran, writing with particular reference to Fitzgerald's anguished search for an answer as to "*why I had become identified with the objects of my horror or compassion*", observes that "health - the condition of action - presupposes a flight from oneself, a desertion of ourselves. No true action without the fascination of the *object*".²² The sick man sees "objects" as only "modalities of himself. To be sick is to coincide totally with oneself".²³ It is the reduction of the "object" to a modality of Joseph's self, the infection of the ontological by the epistemological, which rots Joseph's world and results in *Dangling Man's* claustal atmosphere, its hermetic inertness. As Joseph comes to "coincide" with himself, in retreat from "the fascination of the *object*", *Dangling Man* struggles to separate itself from his solipsistic stance. This is what can be seen in the moments of lucidity with which Joseph's journal is peppered, as when he comments on his "mind flapping like a rag on a clothes line in a cold wind", or on how "goodness" is "achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love" (102, 75). He writes of how he warms towards Iva even as their life together approaches its disintegration: they "have grown closer. Lately she has been remarkably free from the things I once disliked so greatly", and, although "she is as far as ever from what I once desired to make her", his new-found ease in her company prompts him to ponder the "arrogance with which I set people apart into two groups: those with worth-while ideas and those without them" (126). But these periods of remission occur only *in writing*, not in life. Such insights are voiced by a Joseph who seems distinct from the one who fails to take them seriously as designs for living, who sets them down in his journal and then leaves them there. So marked is this discrepancy that these instances of relative sanity appear at one remove from the action of the novel, footnotes appended to the tale of Joseph's decline to spell out for us the precise nature of his failure, desperate affirmations of a moral context for a self-consuming text.

Dangling Man's attempts to escape the gravitational pull of Joseph's solipsism fail partly because it expends such a great deal of its energy on discrediting him; after the pastiche of Joycean epiphany on Kitty's stair, the novel encounters a consequent difficulty in dramatizing the epiphanic, as with that

"consummating glimpse", as Bellow's options, like Joseph's childhood room, "dwindled" to "a tiny square" (158). For, as the novel proceeds, the moral, emotional and intellectual stakes are lowered; Joseph's climactic realization of his failure to apprehend his "self" can mean little when that "self", and its inability to translate its apprehensions, such as they are, into working models for living, have been so exhaustively satirized. The problem is rooted in Bellow's employment of the "deeply readable" as both the subject and the mode of *Dangling Man's* satire throughout, which results in the very bookish quality of his assault on bookishness itself. The novel differs from Bellow's subsequent works in that it is very much a "finished product", Mosbyesque in itself, impermeable to any "enriching substance" (as desired by Hassan), and appearing to be not so much a book about Joseph as the sort of novel which Joseph would write himself.

3. On *The Victim*

If *Dangling Man* can be seen as a novel organized around the contraction towards vanishing point of its central character, then *The Victim* constitutes a reaction against, and implicit riposte towards, such a reductive construction. There is a contextual rigour in Bellow's second novel which resists the elision of both central character and social reality which its predecessor illustrates. Asa Leventhal can be described as the "hero" of *The Victim* because he is tempted, as is Joseph, by the prospect of self-dissolution but finds resources, drawn from within himself and from the world around him, to fight back against that seductive passivity, here identified literally with death, and to gain a partial victory over the heavy influences which assail him. The world of *Dangling Man* never becomes truly "serious", as that novel makes gestures towards, but does not ultimately incorporate into itself, the notion of reality independent of Joseph's pathology, an omission which prevents it from being the novel *about* World War Two as which it has sometimes been read. But *The Victim* depicts a pathology at large, a deadly, overdetermining "seriousness" abroad in everyday New York life; this novel is very much about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. And the central character's consciousness is not locked in with itself, but set in dynamic relation to that of another, the racist Gentile Kirby Allbee, this relation being so intimate as to be the most immediately evident of many "doublings" in the novel, which is organized around many such points of symmetry, in contrast to *Dangling Man's* centring upon a singularity.

Although it deals in the literary currency of the double, it should be borne in mind that *The Victim* is not a novel of the fantastic, despite some evidence to the contrary. As in all of Bellow's novels, the environment seems to shimmer with barely repressible hidden significances, a coalescence resembling the "pan-determinism" which Tzvetan Todorov sees supplanting "chance" in the "supernatural world" of the fantastic; at times Leventhal's New York appears to be assuming the form of a European Jewish ghetto, as if all directions between the two locales, save the geographical and historical, are being revealed as illusory.¹ And this sinister doubling is not solely the product of Leventhal's imagination, as with Joseph's mapping of a virtual inferno onto an actual Chicago, but a

near-congruence evoked by current intimation, by visual and verbal puns, and by the presence of Allbee, whose relationship with Leventhal is a very physical (near murderous) recapitulation of that between Joseph and his Spirit of Alternatives. Sarah Blacher Cohen argues that Leventhal's perceptions are so limited as to be themselves anti-Semitic (he "can see his fellow Jews only as stereotypes") and that he "projects his own darkest fears about himself onto anyone whose behaviour is the least bit abnormal".² Jonathan Baumbach writes of Allbee as being "a kind of materialized ghost from Leventhal's haunted psyche".³ Gabriel Josipovici opines that "clearly if Allbee had not appeared Leventhal would have had to invent him".⁴ These critics point to implications in the text that Allbee is as much a projection of Leventhal's as he is an actual presence. But an emphasis on the uncanny aspects of the figure cut by Allbee should not distract from the novel's bottom line, which is that, although Allbee does function indeed as a manifestation and nexus of Leventhal's self-hatred, he is revealed eventually as not the "occasion" but rather the "cause" of "Leventhal's victimization" (to transpose the terms employed by Baumbach).⁵ One of the most striking features of the novel's design is the way in which it *courts* the fantastic, only to refute it by means of a violent climax which can be seen as an act of exorcism, of both Allbee as protean "double" and the way of thinking which allows him to be seen, or read, as such.

Allbee is a creature belonging to the reifying domain of Bellow's profane satire, the domain from which Leventhal extricates himself in recognizing and acting upon the very real threat posed by his persecutor's "damned clowning".⁶ Allbee is demonic indeed, in the same sense that *Dangling Man's* Jack Brill is demonic, in that his power is drawn from his prey's willingness to be influenced by him, his host's desire for kinship and perhaps congruence of identity with the parasite. But Allbee is also a "catalyst", as Jonathan Wilson comments, towards "a new clarity of perception" on Leventhal's part.⁷ C.F. Keppler goes further: "the effect which Allbee has on his life proves in the end an entirely wholesome one", he writes, with a peculiar sunniness of interpretation and turn of phrase, as if that which very nearly succeeds in killing Leventhal only makes him stronger.⁸ But there is a beneficial agency unwittingly provided by Allbee, and its essence is expressed in Irving Malin's observation that, in *The Victim*, "reality becomes process, not stasis as in *Dangling Man*".⁹ The

fundamental malignity of Allbee's presence forces Leventhal towards awareness, from solipsism towards recognition and action. The model of hermetic life portrayed in the previous novel is resurrected, magnified (by Allbee's presence as a "double" for Leventhal the apprentice solipsist) and exploded (by Leventhal's refusal to succumb to it).

Asa Leventhal is a young married Jew working in the editorial department of a small New York magazine. As *The Victim* begins, he has been suffering from "nerves", and is finding that "lately he was more susceptible than he had ever been before to certain kinds of feeling", "inclined to be short and neutral" with everyone save his wife Mary, who is out of town on family business for the greater part of the novel (20/1, 87). In her absence, he deals as best he can with a crisis in the Staten Island family of his brother Max (also absent, working in a Texas shipyard); Mickey, one of Max's two sons, is terminally ill, and the mother, Elena, seems to be in danger of mental collapse. Simultaneously, Leventhal is besieged (and, perhaps, seduced) by the anti-Semitic and apparently nihilistic rantings of a down-at-heel former acquaintance, Allbee, who views his fall on hard times as being a direct consequence of a previous altercation between Rudiger (Allbee's former employer) and Leventhal. This argument supposedly led to Allbee's dismissal (as, Allbee asserts, Leventhal intended it to do), which in turn precipitated his alcoholism, his estrangement from his wife (who subsequently died in a car accident), and his destitution. Criticism of *The Victim* has tended to concentrate, as the novel itself seems to, on the relationship between Leventhal and Allbee, taking the novel's title to refer to *either* one *or* the other; Leventhal being the "victim" of Allbee's intrusions and invective, which culminate in Allbee's suicide attempt in Leventhal's apartment, where the gas pouring from the oven threatens to engulf them both, and Allbee being the "victim" of the conjectured circuitous plot hatched by Leventhal. But the title might be more usefully read as referring to a role being played alternately by the two, an *act* which eventually becomes an *action*, when the role being passed back and forth nears the reality of a chronic condition, a fixed state of "victimhood", equivalent in this novel with death.

To mark Allbee in particular as the sole villain of the piece would be to neglect the nature of the environment from which he materializes. On rereading *The Victim*, it becomes apparent that what has been taken as a matter of course to be the novel's "subplot", the death of Mickey, is a more interesting, if less sensationally coloured, window onto the novel's central concerns and structures. The scenes with Max's family constitute the moral centre of the novel, and part of Allbee's function is to guarantee them as the moral centre, his malign presence exerting a pressure on the narrative which prevents this "subplot" from becoming no more than an index reflecting on aspects of the central character's crisis, as became of the various "subplots" of *Dangling Man*. The first of this chapter's three sections will, in its treatment of Asa Leventhal's New York, consider the notion that the "victim" from whom the novel takes its name is in fact Mickey, the weakened Jew brought down by ghetto life, a "victim" in his inability to "act" in self-defence (against a disease which is invisible to the naked eye and has taken hold of his body), whose sickness and death function in one sense as clues to the nature of the larger processes - of decline and of regeneration - depicted in the novel.

3.1 "New York"

Mickey is kept sealed up, as if in hiding, by Elena. The phone is off the hook, the doorbell disconnected, the sick boy lying in a room in which the blinds are down and the light source is electric. Elena is terrified at the prospect of giving her child up to the care of the hospital, a fear which Leventhal attributes to her "old country" superstitions (Elena being an Italian-American Catholic whose mother behaves as if she "thinks she's still in Sicily"); he berates her for being such a "peasant" in her mistrust of American medicine (52, 8). Instead, she attempts to preserve her son in a state of incapacitated stasis, in truth a slow-motion decline, as illustrated by Leventhal's observation of her closing the door of Mickey's sickroom "with such care that it seemed to him whole minutes passed" (7). Leventhal pities his other nephew, Philip, who makes his own meals of cereal and milk, and whose new haircut leaves his head partially "shaved" (48/9). The apartment's air is stirred by a "sooty" fan, the "insectlike swiftness" of its blades suggestive of "a fly hovering" (48). In a moment of especially black irony, Leventhal arrives at the apartment only to find it empty, and, asking around ("do you know where I can find my people?"), encounters the building's



superintendent by "the furnace room stairs" (160). Mickey, one of Leventhal's "people" in both the familial and racial senses, drifts towards death in what is portrayed cumulatively as a ghetto, in which his family live near the "furnace".

The text intimates a sense of readerly unease concerning the nature of the world it presents; details such as the severity of Philip's haircut or the nutritional inadequacy of his diet, or the notional fly waiting to alight, can be accounted for simply enough as being "realistic", but they also combine into a pattern which provokes an attentive reading into a kind of hermeneutic double-take. And this doubling of New York cannot be accounted for as being only a projection of Leventhal's troubled consciousness, a mapping of his "nerves" onto the city, because Elena's "old country" mistrust of American medicine, it is implied, is well founded. The doctor who visits Mickey, trained in "Austria" ("they really learn in Europe", contends his admirer Mrs Harkavy, "because their slums are worse"), is an etiolated creature with "thin discs (...) of spectacles", who fails to give the family the promised warning of Mickey's final decline (74, 156). Once the boy has been admitted to hospital, Leventhal phones for information on his condition, but does not believe that Mickey is "doing nicely", as he is told, because "there were upwards of three thousand beds in the hospital. How could the girls at the switchboard be expected to know anything but the bare facts about each patient - whether he was alive or dead, that is?" (122). He fears that Mickey is approaching his "showdown" with death, prefiguring his own eventual confrontation with Allbee (140). Allbee at one point suggests a scheme whereby a proliferation of hospitals would entail a dwindling number of prisons, since both kinds of institution deal with different forms of the same "disease" (130). And Mickey's hospital is figured as a variation on a prison; Leventhal's last sight of the boy alive is of him unconscious and on intravenous drip; "the level of the liquid in the flask held by a clamp on the long stand did not seem to change", Mickey lying as if held in place by the needle "taped to his arm with strips broad enough for a grown man" (140). In the hospital's forecourt there are "stone jars of vines and geraniums, too massive for the small shrunken court", just as, inside the building itself, that which might thrive, given space in which to move, is confined, Mickey's demise being a foregone conclusion.

Mickey is figured in various instances as a double for Leventhal. His immobility in the hospital offers an analogy for Leventhal's Jewishness as seen by Allbee, a condition in which one's "spirit" is kept "under lock and key" (130). Elena's smothering of the sick child embodies for Leventhal "the meaning of helplessness", "the fate of the two (...) considered one and the same", in apparent anticipation of his own symbiosis with Allbee (45). The hall of Leventhal's home is on one occasion "airless, just as Mickey's room had been" (144). He sees in the features of Mickey's corpse the makings of a man "like Max and me. A Leventhal" (161). The doctor's diagnosis of the seriousness of Mickey's condition is expressed by means of a serious stare directed at Leventhal, a figure which suggests a sickness to be seen by the trained eye in Leventhal himself (53). But Leventhal emerges as the stronger Jew, with the ability to reject Allbee's anti-Semitic "gas" - both the literally deadly flow from the kitchen at the novel's apparent climax, and the insidious stream of Allbee's racist talk - in an action which retrospectively illuminates the nature of the novel as a whole. As the tropes linking Leventhal and Mickey indicate, and as the more insistent doubling of Leventhal with Allbee stresses, Leventhal is markedly vulnerable to depredations of his self, in which his kinship with others, both actual and perceived, is distorted into a denial of his own identity as an individual. In forcibly separating himself from the play of "doubles", Leventhal evades his self's imminent negation. It is important to bear in mind that his escape is only possible because his world is reclaimable from the heavy influences at work within it, that he can choose to reject such a fate. Bellow's mapping of a European ghetto onto New York is not done glibly, never *equates* the two, but suggests kinds of congruence between them, suggestions (focussed most violently in the figure of Allbee) which Leventhal fails to recognize even at their most ominous; even as he saves himself, he remains unaware. The possibility of effective self-defence was hardly open to European Jews under Nazi persecution, and this is the most important lack of congruence between the two worlds, the saving grace which holds the novel's vision back from the inferno at which it hints, the possibility which, the novel insists, must be seized upon and defended. We shall return in a later part of this chapter to the theme of the doubled self as victim, and continue here our examination of the doubled New York of *The Victim*.

The topography of the city, as defined by Leventhal's travels around it, is of an urban scene girdled by "a hard encircling rumble of trucks and subterranean trains", with its base at the level of the subway and its ceiling set by the sixtieth-floor office of the choleric Rudiger, whose "inflamed" temper and face "aflame" with anger at Leventhal's visit outshine the sun "far behind the dull, tarnished spikes and pinnacles of the skyscrapers below" (31, 37, 39). Within these boundaries Bellow sets forth scenes reminiscent of *Dangling Man's* cannibalistic Chicago. There is "a redness in the sky, like the flame at the back of a vast baker's oven"; Staten Island swelters beneath a "shimmer of fumes"; "frazzled faces" populate streets "deadened with heat and light", and a restaurant is itself "choked" with diners (18, 4, 27, 31, 93). Leventhal observes the "incandescent low crust" of the Jersey shore, and autumn winds are seen "fanning the smoke out under the clouds, scattering it like soot on paraffin", recalling the soot fallen on the fan in Mickey's room, as if the city lies beneath a cloud of ashes (139, 232). Streets head off into "mighty holes filled with light and stifled roaring", and, after Mickey's funeral, Leventhal sees the reflection of a boat's orange hull as an "apparition of a furnace on the water" (246, 163). In the midst of this, Leventhal is seen by Allbee (as Joseph implicitly saw himself) as a "salamander", the iron quite at home in the fire: but a more cogent interpretation of Leventhal's place in this scheme of things would bear in mind the notion that the soot and heat which swathe the city might have their origin in the ovens of the Holocaust, where perished a multitude such as that which surfaces in one of the novel's two epigraphs, drawn from de Quincey's "The Pains of Opium": "the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens; faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing; faces that surged upward by thousands, by myriads, by generations ..." (126). Although Leventhal ponders the "last judgment" on a man's life as a "candling", and thinks of the hospitalized Mickey as "a candle flame", he never quite grasps the severity, or the proximity, of what threatens him: "it came into his head that he was like a man in a mine who could smell smoke and feel heat but never see the flames" (89, 139, 232).

Another salient feature of this New York is its apparent chaos of migrant hordes. Leventhal bustles through the novel amid "innumerable millions, crossing, touching, pressing", squeezing his way on and off public transport - buses, trams, ferries, trains, and the occasional taxi (164). He first encounters the destitute Allbee in a park "on all sides" of which "the traffic of cars and cabs whipped endlessly, and the cumbersome busses crawled groaning" (18). He boards a ferry loaded with "a crowd of souls", and fears on one journey that "he did not have a conscious destination and was distantly under the dread of being the only person in the city without one" (56, 121). This last impression is reprised in one of Leventhal's dreams, in which he is turned away, in tears, from a train he is trying to board; he is split from "a crowd the sound of whose shuffling rose toward the flags hanging by the hundreds in the arches", a dream of evacuation which he seems not to recognize as a nightmare of execution forestalled - are those flags the stars and stripes, or swastikas (150)? His fear of aimlessness, of not belonging, distracts him from the sinister aspects of "belonging", of having a "destination"; witness his eagerness to catch the train, to place his trust in its provision of an unspecified point of arrival. The novel's first page seems to happen upon Leventhal by accident, as he forces his way from a subway train - "'hey, hold it, wait a minute!'" - just as "the black door of the ancient car was already sliding shut; he struggled with it, forcing it back with his shoulder and squeezed through". It is only by violent physical effort, which leaves him on the platform "breathing hard", "cursing", that Leventhal bursts into narrative, escaping the train and its metaphorically ambiguous terminus.

The most abstruse of these alternative New Yorks is also that which relates most closely to Leventhal's own perspective (and to the set of terms brought into play by the epigraph from de Quincey); the series of figures which portrays New York as some intermittently submerged Atlantean city. The novel's first sentence renders America as a kind of lost continent, having "moved from its place and slid nearer the equator", towards a tropical humidity, while Leventhal feels the air around him as a viscous medium, as did Joseph; there is a "tide of heat", the sun is seen as "overflowing" (96, 95). He looks through a screen "clogged with raindrops", through "windows dripping and gray as tin", while the "imperfections" of another window "suggested the thickening of water at a great

depth when one looks up towards the surface", placing Leventhal as one of the seaborne faces "upturned to the heavens" (123, 219, 187). These details are redolent of opacity, suggestive of how Leventhal's perceptions of the world are obstructed or distorted by the presence in that world of some unspecified inhibitory force; on the ferry, his eye is drawn to a "yellow film spread over the water", to the "formless, working, yellowish green water", that yellow being "akin to the yellow revealed in the slit of the eye of a wild animal, say a lion, something inhuman that didn't care about anything human and yet was implanted in every human being too, one speck of it" (13, 44). This threatening force is therefore predatory ("wild animal"), ubiquitous (both outwith and within the self), ectoplasmic ("formless"), and apprehensive of, although indifferent to, the "human", in its cyclopean reciprocation of Leventhal's gaze. *The Victim* goes on to show us this force on the move and, in the figure of Allbee, on the make, as New York appears to gather a sediment of moral and material detritus, seeping up from below, a drama which unfolds in the midst of a strange liquidity felt most profoundly as a *colloid*. The air at the novel's end is "moist, odorous and black; one felt it like a soft weight", marking the persistence of the "strange things, savage things" which Leventhal senses as being "hung near him all the time in trembling drops, invisible, usually, or seen from a distance" (259, 84). When Allbee taunts Leventhal with accusations of a predilection for the "'safe and tame'" - "'nothing ever tempts you to *dissolve* yourself'" (emphasis mine) - he stands as an advocate for this sinister state of phenomena and consciousness in suspension (131). He appears in a sense as the protean, ectoplasmic harbinger of a protean, ectoplasmic world.

The colloidal strangeness of this New York is both a numinous promise of some attainable revelation and an avatar of the poisonous, invisible gas which comes close to taking Leventhal's life. It beckons, and also threatens, as does the spirit of metaphor in "The Old System". It is the climate of the perilous territory which Leventhal traverses, a zone in which hierarchies (of meaning as of social status) are subject to disturbance and inversion. As metonymies are refracted by Bellow's metaphor into "strange things, savage things", it becomes clear that the narrative path on which Leventhal arrives (with some difficulty) at the novel's opening is narrow, more of a tightrope than a roadway; below, on all sides, there extends the "deeply readable" landscape of metaphor, exerting a

gravitational pull on Leventhal, exhibiting a predatory tendency to "dissolve" him.

The strange, savage Allbee is encountered by Leventhal at a drinking fountain, the point where, "limping and jetting", water is placed at the disposal of the thirsty urbanite (18). But there is a sense in which this apparent dominion over the elements is illusory, and Allbee, presented indirectly throughout the novel as some debased form of aquatic life, arrives on the scene like an upward surge of that "yellowish green water" - "what kind of a fish is this?", Leventhal asks himself as Allbee begins his unwelcome overtures (22). The metaphor takes hold in Leventhal's mind, but extends also into objective reality. At one point, the skin of Allbee's "jaw and throat was creased in a way that made Leventhal think of gills. (...) for an instant he was no more human to him than a fish or crab or any fleshy thing in the water" (68). Such an impression is surreal, violently subjective in its depiction of its object, but there are indications that Leventhal is not mistaken. Allbee will later materialize amphibiously from "the wavering, longitudinal grays and shadows of the watery street", speak of hiring himself out as "human bait", and resolutely declare that "I must take myself in hand before everything wriggles away from me" (124, 171, 174). Living in Leventhal's flat, Allbee summons up a kind of flood, leaving the bathroom, bathrobe and towels sodden after showering, and apparently living on a diet of liquids - alcohol, milk, coffee and, Leventhal angrily suggests, "sink water" (149, 165, 175, 180, 184). Allbee's untidiness allows waste matter to accrete and *overflow*, the kitchen sink "full of dishes and garbage", newspapers "scattered over the front-room floor", ash trays "spilling over" (184). His conversation is littered with nautical metaphors, from his early reference to the drunken Noah, through his talk of "pearl diving" and "Greek sponge divers", to his insistence that Leventhal and he are "not in the same boat" (67, 146, 203). He is, as he says, one "used to low places", and Leventhal initially is set on resisting his upward rise - "I won't give ground" (60, 59). But "ground" is precisely what gives way beneath Leventhal's feet as he allows Allbee access to his thoughts and to his home. Towards the novel's end, Leventhal expels Allbee from the apartment after discovering him *in flagrante delicto*, or thereabouts, with an unnamed woman in the bedroom: "both of them, Allbee and the woman, moved or *swam* toward him out of a *depth* of life in which he himself would be lost, choked, ended. There lay horror, evil, all that he had

kept himself from" (emphases mine, 249). Allbee is the nexus of a pattern of imagery which shows Leventhal conceiving of others as varieties of cold-blooded underwater species - his employer Mr Beard as a "goddamned fish", the aloof colleague Mr Millikan as "a shellfish down in the wet sand (...) you were the noise of the water to him" (3, 177). Leventhal displays an unwitting grasp of the nature of the threat posed to him, from the moment the word "fish" pops into his mind until he suggests, in the novel's epilogue, an alternative method of suicide to Allbee - "you could have jumped in the river" (263). But it is not a comprehensive understanding; an amphibian such as Allbee would be in little danger of drowning.

These images, when cross-referenced with those describing Leventhal's mental and physical states, reveal what it is that Leventhal sees as desirable, seductive, in a figure such as Allbee. Leventhal is troubled by the apparently excessive *fluidity* of his moods, an anxiety provoked further by the presence of the sea-creature Allbee: before him, Leventhal's "self-possession" is "like a reflection in water that may be wiped out at the first swell"; he feels "a drench of shame like a hot liquid over his neck and shoulders" on discovering that Allbee has read some postcards, containing barely coded intimacies, from Mary; and on Allbee's final, suicidal visit to the apartment, Leventhal's terror, "like a cold fluid, like brine, seemed to have been released by the breaking open of something within him" (171, 185, 253/4). Allbee's imperative, to "dissolve" oneself, would free Leventhal from the turbulent liquidity of consciousness, allow him to merge with the "yellowish green water". His submission to Allbee's world-view reveals a desire to be done with the strictures of identity, of dignity, which demand a compromise with, rather than a surrender to, the fluidity of (and around) the self. Towards the novel's end, as he begins to reassert his distance from "all that he had kept himself from", Leventhal gazes, with an apparent erotic fascination, at Allbee's woman: "there was an irregularity in the shape of her eyes; one was smaller than the other. It was with the larger, more brilliant eye that she returned his stare" (243). The echo, in this exchange, of that inhuman eye, the colour of which Leventhal saw falling on the waters, presages a settlement of sorts between Leventhal and that which once drove him to panic - "the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined" (16). He is at last able to face down that "depth of life" which, as he defined his identity

through his attempts to rise above it, kept its hold upon him.

Jonathan Wilson writes that Leventhal, in common with other Bellow characters, "is permitted glimpses of a reality that co-exists with his own and that he is 'lucky' not to have become a part of", but the violence with which Allbee's "reality" impinges upon Leventhal's insists that Leventhal is "part of" the co-existent domain.¹⁰ Allbee's skill as a confidence trickster, like Tina Braun's, lies in his ability to have his victim relinquish his jealously guarded "ground"; the Bellovian con artist is a *levitationist*, whose power of metaphor forces the victim from his feet, translates him into a temporary state of suspension (of critical faculties and of fixed identity). This trick demands that its victim recognize the failure of his own assumptions; his chosen categories and terms by which he is accustomed to sort and define the world, are inadequate, necessary but insufficient. It has been argued that Allbee's categories and terms are revealed as being more true than Leventhal's: David Galloway sees Allbee revealing "the very face of the absurd universe, which is closer, as delineated in this novel, to Allbee's vision than it is to Asa's", and Michael Glenday writes of Allbee's "more profound and authoritative vision", which Glenday nominates as "the Bellovian vision".¹¹ But Allbee would be more properly placed as a creature, rather than master, of *The Victim's* New York, as an impresario rather than as a sage, as we shall see by examining the roles of art and artifice in *The Victim*, the essence of the novel's comic strain.

3.2 Act and Action

Treating his nephew Philip to a day in the city, Leventhal finds himself reluctantly accompanying the boy to the cinema. The film which Philip chooses, although not named in the novel, is *The Climax*, a 1944 Boris Karloff movie heavily derivative of the previous year's lucrative screen adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*.¹² Leventhal and Philip are watching a highly *inauthentic* and third-hand work of art, in which a mad scientist is "haunting the dressing room of a theater where he had murdered his mistress many years ago. He had hallucinations about a young star who resembled her and he attempted to strangle the girl" (91/2). Bellow's reference to such a Grand

Guignol melodrama suggests an ironic slant on certain elements of his own novel, as if *The Victim* conceives of its own dealings in the hallucinatory and the murderous as, to some extent, an involvement in the overheated and the ridiculous. His "nerves jarred" by the "flaring lights" and the "strident" music, Leventhal repairs to the lavatory, where another disaffected member of the film's audience disparages the film itself as an "inferior vehicle" for what he praises as the "genius" of Karloff: "he really understands what a mastermind is, a law unto himself" (92). An actor whose talent lies in the impersonation of the "mastermind", but who is helplessly subject to the "law" of the horror film industry, Karloff's dilemma feeds into the novel's exploration of the relation between "acting" and "action". However grand his "genius", however epic his performance, such claims on greatness are undercut by the shabbiness of the schlock horror product in which he appears, and perhaps such claims have their origin only in the disparity between the relative sophistication of Karloff's style and the debased nature of the entertainment itself.

Allbee, as he lurks by the drinking fountain, is for Leventhal not only a "fish" but "an actor if ever I saw one" (22). Leventhal's puzzlement before Allbee's accusatory preliminaries is taken to be disingenuous, as "effrontery and bad acting": "just like a bad actor to accuse everyone of bad acting", thinks Leventhal (23). Allbee accuses Leventhal of putting on "some act" before Rudiger, deliberately provoking the latter's anger in expectation that Allbee would suffer the consequences (28). Although this was not Leventhal's intention, it would have been in the world according to Allbee, for whom interaction is imposture; his phrasing of the difference in social standing between Leventhal and himself - "you're in the empyrean (...) and I'm in the pit" - measures that difference not only by a vertical standard, but also by a theatrical one, as if their lots in life were allocated like seats in a theatre (61). Even as Leventhal observes Allbee's manic hamming, he remains largely unaware of what such "bad acting" implies. He dreads Allbee's inevitable reappearance with "the same song and dance as the last time", sees him "playing to the crowd" in a restaurant, intuits the "note of impersonation" in his behaviour, and tags him repeatedly, and accurately, as a "damned clown" (60, 93, 94, 70, 147). Allbee, it emerges, is playing it by ear, improvising a new life, increasingly confident in the range of his abilities: he claims that he could convincingly "go

religious" if in need of a bed in bad weather, is pleased to think that suspicion is "not in my make-up", and reveals that he is "not a drunkard. Not a real one" (146, 172, 182). Leventhal notes how Allbee "improvised" a demand to be introduced to Shifcart, a theatrical agent (247). As Allbee contemplates his ability to "become a new man", Leventhal notes how "very pleased with himself" he is, how "the position of his hands spoke of applause" (204). Allbee is more interested in "scenario work" than acting as a career (206, 224). His ambition is to be, like the "mastermind" Karloff, "a law unto himself", and so he must escape the sphere of performance and move behind the scenes, into production; to fail in this attempt would entail a life similar to that of the actor Karloff, condemned to perform in a sequence of purgatorial "inferior vehicles".

His desire for control of a superior "vehicle" is evident in his fraudulent identification with the disenfranchised North American Indian, "who sees a train running over the prairie where the buffalo used to roam. (...) I want to get off the pony and be a conductor on that train" (207). His ambition stops short of becoming "a stockholder in the company" that runs the railroad, as "that's impossible"; all he seeks is the patronage of the elite, even in a comparatively servile position (208). He would be taking tickets on another of *The Victim's* ambiguous trains, from those such as Leventhal, who, we have learned, is the sort of man who can be pressured into buying tickets to shows which he does not wish to see (20). Late in the novel, Leventhal ponders this notion of the "ticket" acquired against one's better judgment, but the ticket in question here admits one not to a transport (in the physical or aesthetic senses) but to life itself, providing the bearer with "a conviction or illusion that at the start of life, and perhaps even before, a promise had been made" (257). Yet, assertively, "the reality was different. For why should tickets, mere tickets, be promised if promises were being made (...) ? There were more important things to be promised" than "desirable and undesirable" seats in a theatre of life. By this point Allbee has been denounced as "a freak (...) out of a carnival", Leventhal's words implying that Allbee, the aspiring impresario, is more the debased spectacle himself than its promoter (243). But this realization comes only after Leventhal has submitted himself temporarily to Allbee's world-view, a submission made all the stranger by Leventhal's evident and consistent distaste for all things theatrical. His sensibilities are offended by

the opera, in his visits there in his youth "with a kind of alien, skeptical interest", by the way in which a violent, apparently marital, quarrel in the street passes as "entertainment" for an audience of nearby soldiers; and by the "stifling darkness" of the cinema which he visits with Phil (12, 83, 91).

Another perspective on the theatrical, which provides a telling counterpoint to Leventhal's, is found in the words of the journalist Schlossberg, formerly a "theatrical man", now writing "theatrical reminiscences" for Jewish papers, and himself a scourge, and masterful mimic, of "bad acting" (110, 112). Leventhal encounters him at a coffee house table, around which are gathered Shifcart, Leventhal's friend and old room-mate Harkavy, and Harkavy's brother-in-law Goldstone. In the course of a discussion about the merits of various screen actresses, Schlossberg, dismissive of the "regular carnival" of media hyperbole in which "everybody is on the same side with illusion", is reprimanded for being a "tough critic" (118). His reply to this charge takes the form of a discourse on the representation of what is "human" (119/20). His words have been taken by many of *The Victim's* critics as authoritative in their espousal of the belief that "good acting is what is exactly human", and that the good actor chooses "dignity" over hokum. Stanley Trachtenberg places Schlossberg as "the spokesman for reality", while John Jacob Clayton claims that his is "the central speech of Bellow's fiction".¹³ Robert R. Dutton's appraisal of the scene is more bracingly skeptical, reading it as a self-consciously theatrical interlude with Schlossberg as the "ironic figure" at its centre, whose "'high opinion of what is human' is founded only on the appearance of things rather than on the nature of them".¹⁴ What Dutton rightly emphasizes is that whatever truths are expressed by Schlossberg are provisional, concerned with "acting" rather than "action", and that his sentiments require translation into real, rather than theatrical or cinematic, terms. Leventhal tentatively begins this task when he applies Schlossberg's critical categories of "black and white", the assertion that the merits of a performance are plainly visible, to his notional kinship with Allbee. He has seen an "explicit recognition in Allbee's eyes which he could not doubt was the double of something in his own", and, with reference to Schlossberg, concedes to the authority of that intuition: "the truth must be something we understand at once, without an introduction or an explanation, but so common and familiar that we don't always realize it's around us" (151/2). "Truth" is thus a dweller in that

colloidal strangeness, an enveloping "promise" of meaning. The spin which Leventhal puts on Schlossberg's words lies in their application not to "acting", to representation, but to that which is represented, not to a notion of *faithfulness* but to that to which art must *be* faithful.

Leventhal, unlike *Dangling Man's* Joseph, is not a writer, having difficulty even in penning a letter to his absent wife; he begins enthusiastically, but he hasn't the words to render events coherently - "the words beginning to sprawl as his hand raced" and makes a messy business of it, the ink "staining his fingers", the letter itself "crumpled in his hand" before it is posted (8, 59, 70). He is a reader both by profession and by inclination, not of "literature" but of his environment and its minutiae. His own perception of an amoral force pervasive throughout his world finds itself echoed by certain of Allbee's metaphors, leading him to embrace, and eventually to confront, the "truth" of that perception. Allbee offers him a choice of readings: in one version of the world, Leventhal is implicated as an oppressor, the sure if indirect cause of Allbee's redundancy and decline, and in the other, Leventhal is just another of the oppressed, in a world of "blind movement, vast movement", in which "people have a destiny forced on them" (62). The alternatives are guilt and insignificance, causality and chaos, and Leventhal opts for the latter, begins to think in Allbee's terms, of how we are all "carried on currents, this way and that" (81). It becomes evident that Allbee is determined to impose his own order on, and accomplish his own ascendancy over, "insignificance" and "chaos", while Leventhal submits to them, rather than risk being seen in the role of the guilty party, rather than be one of Allbee's Jews, supposedly above and in control of the otherwise general state of animalistic flux, "on the inside", as Allbee says of Shifcart (206). Schlossberg's stance as a "tough critic" functions as a corrective to Leventhal's weakness of sensibility, a fatal weakness in *The Victim's* New York. In *Dangling Man*, "authorship" is shown to be a potentially solipsistic project, as Joseph's art proves insufficient in itself as a source of selfhood; in *The Victim*, art is a matter of competition red in tooth and claw, a tool to be used and abused by the likes of Allbee the nascent scenarist, who manages to unload one of his "scenarios" onto the vulnerable Leventhal.

Within *The Victim's* colloquy on "the human" there is an implicit aesthetic, which can be gleaned from the modalities of the word "accountability". Leventhal's letter to Mary is an aborted "account of himself", and later Leventhal, pondering Schlossberg's discussion of the uselessness in acting of whatever is "more" or "less" than "human", concludes that, ideally, "'human' meant accountable in spite of many weaknesses" (58, 119, 138). Writing is thus a kind of "accounting", both a recountal and a submission to an implicitly acknowledged standard such as the "human"; by conflating these two aspects of the act of writing, we might define it as a ritual exhibition of the "accountably human", in which art, "in spite of many weaknesses", defers to a standard of veracity. There is also a perceptible conception here of writing as *rehearsal*, proleptic of an ultimate acquiescence before an immutable judgment - the most stringent and well-informed of "tough critics", the God of the Jews. This implication is most visibly present in the tension between the notions of art and humanity propounded by Leventhal via Schlossberg on one hand, and by Allbee on the other. Allbee's ideal "authorship" would be that of Adam, who "called the beasts by their names and they obeyed him. I wish I could do that" (173). Failing that, he would settle for authorship of his self, claiming that there is "no limit to what I can be", rejecting the "Jewish point of view" of a God who sets boundaries and standards, of a God who "doesn't make mistakes. He's the department of weights and measures" (170, 130). His argument is not merely a dismissal of determinism, but of causality itself - "we do get it in the neck for nothing and suffer for nothing" (130). His refusal of "limits", of "weights and measures", has its riposte in the words of Schlossberg on his second appearance, at a party thrown by Harkavy. There Schlossberg speaks of death as being the guarantor of one's "limit", and asserts that recognition of the principle of limits, and a refusal of the temptation to be "more than human", are necessary criteria for the survival of that "humanity": "you want to be two people? (...) Maybe it's because you don't know how to be one" (229).

The talk of death prefigures the imminent, near-fatal, confrontation in Leventhal's apartment, and the reference to the self's desire to be "two people" may be taken as our cue to return to consideration of *The Victim's* treatment of doubling. But in reaching a provisional conclusion as to the relation between "acting" and "action" in this novel, we are directed by Schlossberg's words to

divine whatever "limit" or boundary between the two exists in Leventhal's world. In the epilogue, Leventhal, some years on, reluctantly pays a visit to the theatre with Mary. True to form, he finds the atmosphere to be "suffocating", and neglects the "sentimental and untrue" performance onstage, attending instead to Mary, herself "intent on the play" (258/9). During the interval, Leventhal encounters Allbee, now the consort, or perhaps prisoner, of Miss Crane, a more successful "actor" than himself ("I've got to run. Yvonne will send them out looking for me", 264). Although he still exudes an anti-Semitic scorn, it appears to Leventhal as more a thing of "habit" than of conviction, and to this reading as evidence of a more general distaste for life and for the God of the Jews; Mary's pregnancy is seen as a case of Leventhal "following orders. Increase and multiply" (262). And it seems that Allbee no longer carries with him the electric charge of his ambition; he claims to be "on the train", but as "just a passenger", as "I'm not the type that runs things. (...) I'm the type that comes to terms with whoever runs things" (264). He exits from the narrative to the sound of the theatre's curtain bell, which announces both the novel's end and the beginning of another act, after fomenting a mood of mutual congratulation between Leventhal and himself: "'Congratulations.' (...) 'I congratulate you too'" (263). They bow to each other as if each grants the other an encore; Allbee "with his hands on his hips (...) bent forward", while Leventhal nods repeatedly, as if hypnotized, in return (262/3). His eyes "crumpled and blank", Allbee is burnt out, his aspirations having met their limit, congruent with the boundary of the United States - he confesses to being "'a little lost, out there on the Coast'". Although he is revealed as the ultimate victim of his own "scenario work", the intimations of a more general "scenario" persist; the novel ends as Mary and the theatre usher escort Leventhal to his seat in the darkening auditorium, while he remains curious as to Allbee's "'idea of who runs things'".

Reading this scene with the notion of the *limit* in mind, it might seem that Leventhal's world is permeated *throughout* by the theatrical, much in the way that Mary's face is illuminated for him in his seat by "the refulgence of the stage", or that "the shifting of the theater lights" in the street makes "his vision uncertain" when he runs into Harkavy earlier in the novel (259, 72). But if the theatrical has no boundary as such, there is a limit to its power; there is space for action, a space available

because the sphere of the "human" in *The Victim* is not a finished production but, in keeping with the novel's implicit aesthetic, a rehearsal. Allbee tries to stage his own show, to "name" Leventhal and have him play the stooge, but the latter is able to call the production off before it reaches its fatal conclusion.

3.3 *A Play of Doubles*

In *Dangling Man*, Joseph's disengagement from his environment paradoxically foments the proliferation of his presence throughout that environment. As his consciousness shrinks towards its collapse, the space made available by that shrinking is colonized by avatars of his chosen "self", as the ground which he surrenders becomes a theatre in which variations on the theme of his demise are acted out. Earl Rovit describes Allbee as being a "disconnected grotesque", a manifestation of "the uninvestigated contortions of reality which constantly impinge, as it were, on the edges of our vision when we are concentrating primarily on ourselves", of that which violates our self-determined limits.¹⁵ As *Dangling Man* can be read as a case study of a disappointed consciousness in the process of reifying itself into a "disconnected grotesque", Allbee is in this sense closer as a type to Joseph than is Leventhal; Leventhal differs from Bellow's previous central character in that his centrality as the narrated intelligence acts as a buffer, between the novelistic, integrating intelligence of the narrator and its rival, the improvisational and chaotic intelligence of Allbee. Like Joseph, Allbee asserts a self-determined boundary around his self, but unlike Joseph sees this boundary as being *flexible* according to his will. Refusing the notion of an extrinsic limit to his ambitions, Allbee threatens the "novelistic" as well as the "human"; a model of *The Victim* conceived of as a Venn Diagram would show his consciousness, which begins its struggle by exploiting its intersection with that of Leventhal, attempting to move through Leventhal's and towards the limits imposed on it by the narration which grounds it in the domain of cause and effect. For, in Allbee's world, in which we are arbitrarily "'one day (...) like full bundles and the next we're wrapping-paper, blowing around the streets'", the essentials of character and plot would be unavailable to the writer, as causality is a pattern imposed by a falsifying intelligence, and character is nothing substantial, being merely "'wrapping-paper", packaging (67).

Karl Miller writes that *The Victim* is a novel in which "we are usually aware of two different persons who are neither of them the author - of a division between three persons, for all that they are experienced as one".¹⁶ This reading follows his in its treatment of the novel as not primarily a fiction of the "double" but rather a fiction about "doubling" as a process of division and subdivision, and as a paradigm for the ambiguous value of the fiction-making process itself. Our reading of Joseph places him as Bellow's "victim", his voice circumscribed, subverted and finally dissolved by the ventriloquial power of his "author"; in *The Victim*, Bellow sites the demonic ur-narrator of the earlier novel in the story itself, in the shape of Allbee. Although the aesthetics of the novel's narrator and its villain are apparently at odds - the traditional formalism of the novel pitched against what resembles a nascent, if already corrupted, postmodernism - both are revealed as power structures, competing for the prize of Leventhal's readerly consciousness. Each is a double of the other in the sense that both are parasitic in nature, drawing on (or drawing towards) Leventhal's substance. Although *The Victim's* structures prevent Leventhal from attaining the status of Bellow's later characters - that is, in H. Porter Abbott's words, that of character "conceived of as a nexus of passion, enigma, freedom and form" - they exhibit what appears to be a guilty conscience deriving from their awareness of this.¹⁷ The divisions of Bellow which Miller locates in the text play certain roles; Allbee plays the demon, the narrator plays the demiurge whose profane creation lends that demon its power, and Leventhal plays their fool for the greater part of the novel. That his eventual rebellion wins his freedom from the intrusions of Allbee, but not from those of the narrator's irony, accounts in part for the sinister tone of the novel's epilogue, in which the assurance of the narratorial voice, its continued ease of authoritative access to the workings of Leventhal's mind, carries with it an oppressive - suffocating, even - sense of claustrophobia. There is an unease generated by the awareness that Allbee's very desire for such a power of "authorship" has imbued that power with menace, as if the light in which it casts Leventhal is merely another "refulgence" of the theatrical, intent on his reification.

The doubling of Allbee and the narratorial agency has a more persistent ring to it than that of Allbee and Leventhal. Although the two characters move towards symbiosis, their relationship resembles a passing infatuation between ill-suited lovers, the sexual element at the fore in the scene in which Allbee strokes Leventhal's hair, the latter finding himself "caught under" the other's "touch" (201). Leventhal perceives Allbee most keenly as a *weight*, as if he were being pressed down by a lover, and at one point he has to give Allbee a piggyback (95, 143, 175, 205).²³ Allbee's plan does involve having Leventhal *carry* him up from destitution, and in the absence of Leventhal's wife their physically and emotionally close proximity has its erotic edge, Leventhal "intoxicated" as well as "oppressed" by his mental picture of Allbee (95). When Leventhal finds Allbee in bed with the woman, the reader witnesses a dramatic paradigm for Allbee's insidious methods and aims, in that he is shown to be both an usurper and a seducer. This sexual undercurrent is more pronounced than the series of intimations depicting Leventhal and Allbee as "doubles", since the novel appears to be rather impatient with the inherited baggage of the *doppelgänger* theme. Although Leventhal takes on Allbee's world-view and is shown, late in the novel, waking up one morning in a state of disarray similar to Allbee's habitual dilapidation, he is more displaced than he is duplicated; Leventhal is evicted from his self, becomes "his own observer", "able to see himself as though through a strange pair of eyes" (231, 95). Allbee is a double not of Leventhal, but of Leventhal's distanced and fictional construct of his own self, the product of a self-consciousness which allows him to imagine a "look of recognition" in Allbee's face which "duplicated the look in his own" (143). As the dismissive reference to *The Climax* implies, *The Victim* cannot bring itself to indulge without irony in the melodramatic aspects of the fantastic; the tropes figuring Leventhal as the victim of a literal elision of the self are mostly slight, throwaway puns: As Allbee settles into the apartment, Leventhal is in "a state of indifference akin to numbness", Allbee's presence or absence being "'all the same'" to him, the *differences* between host and guest being replaced by a *sameness* (165). Later, Leventhal has "half a mind" to ask Allbee what he is if he is not indeed a "'real'" drunkard (183, 182). When, at the novel's own "climax", Leventhal ejects the suicidal Allbee from the apartment, his action expels also the false Leventhal which saw Allbee as its kin.

Leventhal's wake-up call is delivered by Harkavy, who reiterates Schlossberg's arguments in a more forceful voice, his anger at Leventhal's support of Allbee recapitulating the tantrum of Rudiger's which sets the plot in motion, and precipitating the novel's end. Although Harkavy cuts a less congenial figure than Schlossberg, and speaks in a less portentous tone, close reading of his speech reveals that he talks more "sense" than anyone else in the novel, in that he talks in terms of the metaphors employed by Bellow himself. He upbraids Leventhal for exhibiting signs of "ghetto psychology", tells him that the (carnival freak) Allbee has "got you on the merry-go-round ", observes with concern that Leventhal has got "in pretty deep" with Allbee, and advises him to "get next to yourself" and face facts (223, 224, 225, 78). His rage at Leventhal's parroting of Allbee's views on how "Jews have influence with other Jews" recalls that of Rudiger: he "furiously pounded the metal table, his face and his elongated throat flaming" as he exclaims that Allbee's words sound "like the Protocols" of the Elders of Zion (236). This is Leventhal's most debased moment, mouthing in a "trance" Allbee's anti-Semitic sentiments, and it is thanks to Harkavy's corrective outburst that he returns to awareness: "'Wake up! What's life? Metabolism? That's what it is for the bugs. Jesus Christ, no! What's life? Consciousness, that's what it is'" (237). Prompted by this, Leventhal casts aside his anxiety as to how to have Allbee leave before Mary returns "one might brush away a clinging insect from one's face" (239). When Allbee then attempts to accuse Leventhal of innate cruelty, genetically inherited - "your instinct told you where to jab, in the way that insects know where they'll find the most sap" - his metaphor fails to strike its target because, as Harkavy has stressed, Leventhal is no "bug" after all (245).

Harkavy, the advocate of "consciousness", although placed structurally in symmetrical opposition to Rudiger, demands rebellion against the rule of symmetry and action against Leventhal's duplicitous duplicate self. His outburst comes on the morning after the seventh birthday party of his niece Libbie, herself a correlative of Leventhal's nephew Mickey, and also, for an instant, a "double" for Leventhal. That Mickey functions in one sense as an embodiment of the doomed Jew seems to be confirmed by the way in which his name conflates those of the stereotypical Jewish merchants in the

song which Leventhal remembers being sung by his father: "Call me Ikey, call me Moe, / But give me the dough" (98). Leventhal is haunted by his father's apparent conformity to a racist type, and also by the anachronistic and incongruous aspects of such an overtly "Jewish" identity. Libbie's name is another amalgam; of "Leventhal", "Allbee", and the "Statue of Liberty", the last appearing early in the novel as no more than a smear of "black, a twist of black that stood up like smoke" (45). On first meeting Libbie, Leventhal cannot make out "the child's features; he saw only the vivid pallor of her face and the reddish darkness of her hair" (72/3). One of the United States' favourite symbols of itself is thus shown as a promise not of freedom, but of extinction, while a young girl with a similar name combines in her appearance the ghostly blur of the dying Mickey and the "reddish darkness" of *The Victim's* infernal New York. But at her birthday party, Leventhal sees her face illuminated by the flames of the candles adorning her cake, as she decides which course of action to pursue - whether to embrace the fire or to blow it out: "Libbie reached out and tried to capture a drop of the melting wax. (...) The child lowered her face to the clear ring of candles. Leventhal saw the liquid image of them in her eyes and on her white forehead. She blew, and the white, odorous wax smoke drifted over the table", while Leventhal himself "still gazed heavy eyed at the candles" (226). Like Libbie, Leventhal is drawn by the seductive flame, and her extinguishing of it, in her ritual passage towards maturity, prefigures Leventhal's own revolt into action. The gas filling his apartment promises either suffocation or a climactic conflagration, but Leventhal wakes from his sleep, literally and metaphorically, to refuse both the death by poison and the death by fire (a "candling" of sorts).

Libbie, although herself incorporated into one of *The Victim's* symmetric patterns, her birthday offering a promise of renewed life to be balanced against the assertion of the inescapable "limit" made by Mickey's death, functions as a retort to such systems of order. The novel itself is loaded with such symmetries, from the ringing of Leventhal's doorbell which heralds the imminent arrival on the scene of Allbee, through to the curtain bell in the epilogue (19). And these symmetries seem to load down Leventhal also, as when he has "the strange feeling that there was not a single part of him on which the whole world did not press with full weight" (232). Allbee is less Leventhal's

"double" than he is the locus of the "doubling" agencies, the heavy influences, at work in the world of *The Victim*, and, as the epilogue implies, Leventhal may successfully resist Allbee's advances while remaining vulnerable before more persistent, and less easily exorcised, reificatory powers. Enlightenment eludes him, for his rejection of the self which he has concocted for himself with Allbee's encouragement is not a conscious rejection of the reified self *as such*. For he appears throughout the novel as one who *reacts* rather than *initiates*. His inescapable passivity recalls that of the abject Joseph, whose first-person narration (who he *thinks* he is) is permeated with the presence of another Joseph (who he *really* is), as Bellow dispenses to him enough rope with which to hang himself. In *The Victim*, fiction is seen as a system disposed towards the falsification of whatever self it might attempt to represent, a possibly well-intentioned Faustian striving for an authenticity of character which inevitably succumbs to inauthenticity, converts the first-person into the third-person. The narrating voice cannot establish a clear dividing line between itself and the likes of Allbee. But Mickey and Libbie, although included as essential components in the scheme of fictions enclosing Leventhal, are also indicative of a life beyond those fictions' reifying reach; the former, immobile, sinks out of our range of vision, while the peripatetic Libbie seems to be involved in a concerted attempt to evade the attentions of authority figures such as her mother, who in exasperation threatens to "tie" her daughter "in the middle with strings" (73, 222). Both children appear in the text without speaking, as if independent of the narrating voice's ventriloquizing power. And Libbie carries with her a sense of potential which defies the strictures placed upon her by that fictive frame, a potential perhaps stressed by the birth of Leventhal's own child imminent at the novel's end.

4. On *The Adventures of Augie March*

Critical readings of Bellow's third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), are often given to emphasizing apparent differences between its style and form and those of its predecessors; Mark Schorer sees in it an inversion of *Dangling Man*'s hermetic principle, and Andrew Waterman comments on its "openness reflected in the tumultuous abundance of Augie's experience".¹ Irving Malin finds it "'open', in motion", distinct from the earlier, "'closed'" novels, in which "the various images of movement are under the surface", only occasionally coming to light.² And for Irving Howe, *Augie March* exhibits a new-found desire on Bellow's part "to break away from the stateliness of the literary sentence", to attain a prose capable of communicating "sensations of immediacy and intensity", and, "above all, the sense that men are still alive".³ Thus, the novel to which we now turn our attention is commonly seen as marking a *caesura* in Bellow's writing, a fundamental rethinking of the novelistic form for which his fiction reaches. But our readings of *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, although not differing significantly from those cited above which stress their claustral sense of closure, do diverge from Ralph Freedman's contention that *Augie March* introduces Bellow's conception of "society (...) *no longer* only opposed to the hero, whether knowing or blind. Rather, it ironically reflected the hero's consciousness - functioning as his symbolic mirror - while at the same time it also maintained its time-honoured place as the source and creator of his condition" (emphasis mine).⁴

Our argument has been that the "environment" which Freedman observes as serving in the later novels as "an index for the exploration of characters' attitudes towards themselves and their world and at the same time as an index for the definition of an external life" performs that same function in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*.⁵ Freedman argues that, from *Augie March* onwards, Bellow's novels depict "a dialogue (...) between protagonist and world, in which both prove to be equally evanescent as well as equally stable, equally prone to interchanging their active and passive states".⁶ If this is so, then *Augie March* does indeed represent something of a schism, with its (supposedly) "open" and conversational style, in contrast to its predecessors, which we have read as being dramas of

inauthenticity, in which competing voices, within the text and within the story, struggle to achieve an unmediated mastery of their materials, the self which is implied by the possession of an authentic voice being the most prized "material" of all. If we think of the earlier novels as tragedies, in which the central characters aspire to transcend the hierarchical system of voices which places them as inauthentic and ventriloquized, to escape the condition of the *fictive*, and are defeated in the effort, then *Augie March*, with its sense of an equitable reciprocity between character and context, is indeed a break with Bellow's previous form. If Freedman is right, then the "deeply readable", that which is carried as a weight in the previous novels, must perform a more benign function in *Augie March*, must become a medium for self-definition rather than the means by which the environment defines the self. For these novels have centred upon their heroes rather in the manner in which Allbee centres upon Leventhal, in that symmetries, doublings and correspondences comprise both the substance of the text and the burden borne by the central character. The action of these novels might be said to consist in the central character's efforts to exorcise that burden from its host, his "self".

Augie March's voice seems to speak with a greater degree of freedom, his first-person reminiscences which constitute the novel digressing in their recollections and ruminations to such an extent that no frame of metaphorical reference, no externally imposed system of subtextual schematizing, might be able to contain them or subvert their account of the world with an implied alternative. There is some familiar Bellovian patterning throughout, but in general the novel, like its hero, seems to define itself *against* these systems rather than *through* them. It gives the impression of being on Augie's side against such heavy influences, and places him in ironic context only intermittently. It has the air of a talking cure, of an expiation of Augie's uninvited inheritances, "inheritance" in this novel being seen as more of a demand made upon, rather than a gift made to, the inheritor. Its action on first reading resembles not a *knotting into* but a *disengagement from*, Augie being the first of Bellow's heroes to implicitly "disengage" from ur-narratorial influence towards the novel's end. A picaresque tale of a young man at large in the world (most notably in his hometown of Chicago, in Mexico and, at the novel's end, in Europe in the years following World War Two) and forever dodging the pull of "those great currents where I can't be myself", *Augie March* has its hero falling in with authority

figures who exert various kinds of influence intellectual, sexual, financial, political - over him, each would-be benefactor insisting that Augie inherit his or her *modus vivendi*.⁷ A better reader of the world than Leventhal, Augie eludes the persuasive versions of it proposed by others, preferring to learn instead "on the order of object lessons" such as those he receives by observing his "simple-minded" mother's abjection before the rule of "Grandma" Lausch, the despotic lodger in his childhood home (3). Lausch is soon succeeded by others with claims to make on Augie's consciousness (the entrepreneur William Einhorn, the cynic Mimi Villars, the adventurer Thea Fenchel, the millionaire Robey, the lawyer Mintouchian and the mad scientist Basteshaw, to name only the most aggressive of his patrons), but consistent throughout the novel is the desire of Augie's elder brother Simon to have Augie become a big shot, wealthy by marriage and by business, like himself.

For Augie, "reality comes from giving an account of yourself", and in his summation of his life he chronicles many instances in which his self is assailed by those who would subtract from or divide it (450). That self is present for the reader in the character of Augie's voice, nominally independent of the ventriloquizing agencies - Kirby Allbee resurrected, albeit in diluted form, and multiplied - which gather around it. His narration must be a proof of his resistance to these influences, his voice synecdochic of a self that is whole and free, remaining distinct from the other voices it transcribes. The ultimate objective of our reading will be to determine the nature of whatever "reality" it is that Augie March attains for his self and for his world.

4.1 Invisibility

A central concern of *Augie March* is the possibility, or otherwise, of seeing without being told. Both Einhorn and Robey require Augie's services specifically as a "listener", which Augie believes himself to be "by upbringing", but Augie's most heroic endeavour is to retrieve, rather than receive, knowledge (72, 445). His rebellion is not so much against such authority figures as it is against the accretion of inherited, inhibiting substances in his own eye. When he writes of his affection for his mother, or for his "idiot" younger brother Georgie, there is an implicit qualification, that his eye is

necessarily colder than his heart, that he must regard others as "object lessons" if emotion is not to frustrate the perspicacity of his vision. He is schooled in this coolness of the eye by Grandma Lausch, the first of "those Machiavellis of small street and neighborhood that my young years were full of" (4). She seeks to educate Augie and Simon in the ways of a world populated by "a desperate mankind without feelings", as "illustrated" by the situation of Georgie, "the trustful, loving and simple surrounded by the cunning-hearted and tough" (10). "But the principal illustration was (...) Mama", deserted by her children's father, and now made to wait upon Lausch and Winnie, the lodger's dog (10). One of the novel's opening anecdotes concerns Augie's part in Lausch's plan to acquire spectacles, free of charge, for Mama; Augie inherits Lausch's skills as a small-time confidence trickster, but not his mother's poor eyesight. And although he refuses the despair concomitant with Lausch's cynicism, he is influenced by the form of her teachings, looking as he does on those around him as "illustrations", whether of admirable resilience or of unfortunate rigidity, and to an extent values them according to their illustrative capacities; Mama, for instance, didn't have much to teach, *poor woman*" (emphasis mine, 3). Lausch's scholastic method is to make Augie "see where it led to give your affections too easily", and in her insistence on this theme she is herself the sort of monstrous heavy influence of which she demands that Augie be mindful (13). She succeeds in having Georgie consigned to a home for the mentally disabled, his fate reinforcing the "lesson" first seen in the manner in which Mama "lay herself dumbly on the outcome of forces, *without any work of mind*, of which she was incapable" (emphasis mine, 54). It's the "work of mind" which sluices obstructions from the "eye", allows one to "see".

Although Augie takes pleasure through all his senses, he is, like "The Old System's" Dr Braun, governed by the visual. The novel's middle is the story of his love for Thea Fenchel, which takes him on a trip to Mexico, leaving his Chicago behind, as "I could no more stay and let her go than I could put out my eyes" (325). Thea's plan is to acquire an eagle and to train it in the hunting of lizards, so that their ensuing Mexican exploits will provide material for magazine articles; Augie's reiterated fear before this eagle is that it will attack Thea's eyes, and he is "dazed in all my nerves", "dark before the eyes" in its presence (331, 340, 331). Having already flinched before the "killer eye" of

another eagle in a Chicago zoo, he is cowed by the creature's "gruesome jewels" of eyes which "meant nothing in their little lines but cruelty" (326, 333). He is partly intimidated and partly seduced by the notion of the predatory gaze, representative as it is of an epistemology without the "need to herd, account for" phenomena, no requirement to "hold them in the head": "human beings will submit to the gyps of previous history while mere creatures look with their original eyes" (330). In this he is fantasizing of an eye free of consciousness, liberated from the "work of mind" now conceived of as a *burden*, cleansed of interfering "history"; the very process of intellection which enables one to "see" is conceived of here as an obstruction in itself.

But Augie's romantic awe before the eagle's supposed purity of vision proves to be mistaken. It is comically subverted by the animal's thoroughgoing cowardice, fleeing as it does when it encounters opposition from an iguana's snapping jaws. There is an implication that it has been infected with Augie's flighty nature - "he had been tamed on my arm", its claws drawing blood - and its name, Caligula, involves a double-decker pun (on "Augie" and the Spanish "*aguila*") which prefigures the kinship between them (355, 335). Augie finds it "hard to take this from wild nature, that there should be humanity mixed with it", because such a consideration precludes the existence of the disinterested eye of which he has dreamed (355). Caligula's incompetence also goes against the teachings of Lausch (on the ascendancy in the world of "a fighting nature of birds and worms") and of Thea, for whom Augie's pity for the eagle's intended lizard victims is symptomatic of how he gets "human affection mixed up with everything, like a savage" (10, 347). Augie admires the rigour of such viewpoints, but the restraining presence of fear in Caligula's eye proves the free-floating ubiquity of the "human" in the world of *Augie March*.

The novel implies that the "human" is itself carried as a weight by those in possession of, or possessed by, it. One of Augie's frequent apostrophes, to "observation", stresses that he shares the sense, implicit in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, of the embarrassment consequent upon the illumination of the self; it also makes plain the integration in Bellow's scheme of things of the notions of (in)visibility and (in)humanity. It is addressed to the "awful despotism" experienced in

"living in the eyes of others", or by living even within one's own sphere of vision; "you are seen, you have to be aware", writes Augie, comparing the oppression of "vanity" to that of "chiefs and tyrants of the public", who "give no relief from self-consciousness" (335). What Augie goes on to say is that life is lived not only in the "eyes" of others, but also *in* and *through* others, that while the self may agonize over its vulnerability before what it conceives of as external forces, that self is fundamentally mixed with its unloved "other": "in the most personal acts of your life you carry the presence and power of another; you extend his being in your thoughts where he inhabits". It is in the "observation" of "extended being" that Bellow's fictions deal, and thus his writing is in opposition to such reductive, romantic notions of the self as expressed by Augie in his Emersonian dream of ocular purity. The Bellowian "human" is impure, promiscuous, and atavistic in its attachment to its inherited blindspots. An eye as colourless as Ilkington's gin or as pellucid as the "innocent-seeming" caul (examples of "transparency" previously cited in our reading of "The Old System") would be free of the residue of character, able to receive stimuli with perfect clarity, but, unable to filter and distill that information, passive to the point of stillness.

This concern with "observation" as a limited and limiting force marks *Augie March* as a close thematic relative of Bellow's 1951 short story "Looking for Mr Green" and of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. All three texts involve themselves in satiric complication of Ralph Emerson's apotheosis as that "transparent eyeball" in which form he is "nothing" and sees "all"; these narratives implicitly return Emerson's supposedly colourless gaze.⁸ While Emerson's writings exhibit (and, historically, partly constitute) the characteristically American desire for a "world elsewhere", these fictions negotiate the overdetermining American landscape in pursuit of a significantly different objective.⁹ Where Emerson in transcendental mode, invites criticism of his *escapist* tendencies, Bellow and Ellison require to be read as *escapologists*. Ellison, in his 1981 introduction to a reissued *Invisible Man*, quotes the Negro spiritual in which "the hills" deny refuge to the singers: "No hiding place / There's no hiding place / Up here!"¹⁰ He writes of his hope that the novel form holds a potential to be "fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment", akin to that on which "Mark Twain set Huck and Jim", "that might help us keep afloat as we tried to negotiate the

snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal" (*IM*, xx/xxi). Where Emerson's "course" is one of individual upward movement, Ellison's is across, set upon the negotiation of obstacles, a strategy which involves the deployment, rather than the passive contemplation, of available phenomena, in order to attain a "hiding place", or a "raft", a space within social and political realities, rather than a "world elsewhere".

In his admiring review of *Invisible Man* at the time of its publication, Bellow is drawn towards those aspects of the novel on which Ellison himself comments retrospectively. Bellow, praising Ellison's resistance to the "heavy influences" threatening the integrity of the American self, asks "what language is it that we can all speak, (...) what is the stature we can without exaggeration claim for ourselves?".¹¹ Modern novelists, Bellow argues, must strive "to maintain themselves as un-specialists", and Ellison in his fashioning of *Invisible Man* as a "declaration of values", as a stand against the "threatened dissolution by details", works successfully towards this goal.¹² *Invisible Man*, a raft made of "language", remains afloat atop the waters of "dissolution". For it to remain buoyant, it must protect the integrity of its hard-won space against the "specialized intelligences", the enemies of the novelistic imagination, which would undo it.¹³ *Invisible Man*, my reading contends, shares with *Augie March* and "Looking for Mr Green" a strategy by which the "intelligences" with which these texts engage are revealed as "specialized" in one fatal form or another, thus refining the distinction between the novelistic intelligence at the text's core and the "heavy influences" which beset it. All three texts address "despotism" by meeting the stare of the despotic *eye* and exposing the presence of the mote within.

In "Looking for Mr Green", George Grebe is attempting to deliver a benefit cheque to the elusive Mr Green, who is to be found, supposedly, in the Chicago ghetto, in which "blackness" - both a skin colour and as what appears to Grebe to be an absence or shortage of light - is prevalent. The ghetto lacks the structures which Grebe can comprehend; he is aware that he lacks "experience in interpreting looks and signs".¹⁴ There are "no names, (...) no numbers" on doors to tally with the name and number on the cheque ("LMG", 90). Grebe enters a room which he perceives as having

"no light, properly speaking", but which is presumably bright enough for the "dozen, perhaps more" blacks within it ("LMG", 91). Grebe is an ironic avatar of Emerson's eyeball, blind to his blindnesses while eager to transcend consensus reality: "you saw the common agreement or covenant and you were forced to think about appearances and realities" ("LMG", 105). Grebe is also a creature of paper - or more precisely, of paperwork - and of bureaucracy and money, cash or cheque. He wanders through the ghetto under the orders of his supervisor Raynor, who argues "that even though nothing looks to be real, and everything stands for something else, and that thing for another thing and that thing for a still further one - there ain't any comparison between twenty-five and thirty-seven dollars a week, regardless of the last reality" ("LMG", 96). Raynor's reductive cynicism is answered by the claimant Staika, who speaks of her husband's "lungs weaker'n paper", weaker, therefore, than money and officialdom; by the presence in the dim room of "a piano piled towering to the ceiling with papers", irrelevant and out of reach; and, most cogently by "Winston Field", a black invalid who sardonically proves his identity to Grebe by offering him a "scramble of papers" ("LMG", 98, 91, 103). "Field" - whose insistence on documentation as the proof of his approved identity suggests that we should not take his "name" for granted - describes money as being the "only sunbeams (...). Nothing is black where it shines and the only place you see black is where it ain't shining" ("LMG", 102). Raynor's bottom-line reality is revealed as a system of social, and racial, control.

It is with this system that Grebe unwittingly sides, "a sheet of wind-driven paper clinging to his leg" correctly recognizing him as its kin ("LMG", 93). At the story's end, Grebe escapes the ghetto by delivering the cheque to a woman who, "whoever she was, (...) stood for Green", on account of her willingness to receive and sign for the cheque, although her appearance at her doorstep, black and naked (neither "green" nor, evidently, "mister"), might be taken to contradict Grebe's assumption ("LMG", 109). By jumping to this conclusion, Grebe evades an encroaching sense of failure, his face "burning with frost and self-ridicule", which threatens an epiphany comparable to that experienced by the "creature driven and derided by vanity", his "eyes burned with anguish and anger", at the close of James Joyce's "Araby" ("LMG", 109).¹⁵ Grebe eludes the epiphanic (which we have observed

making its presence felt to Joseph in *Dangling Man*) by resorting to an unwarrantedly positive notion that Grebe "'could be found!'" . His solipsistic way of "seeing" intact, Grebe remains devoted to the work of paper, of whiteness, as embodied by Raynor, refusing to countenance the implications of Mr Green's ultimate *invisibility*.

Grebe is employed by Raynor much as Leventhal is used by the Willistons, the former friends of Allbee who suggest that Leventhal should take care of him, as a messenger who maintains the desired distance between upper echelons and the lower depths. A dutiful employee, his mobility and his power of observation are consequently limited as he settles for a befuddled oscillation between his superior Raynor and his charges the claimants, both extremes of his acquaintance pitching ideas which sail over his head; Raynor patronizes him by alluding to the uselessness of Latin, of which they share some knowledge, in comparison with the utility of the twelve-dollar difference between their wages, and "Field" subtly guys him over his naive faith in proper bureaucratic procedure. He is also a middleman for the text itself, his course set by a controlling intelligence which restricts his imaginative reach even as it allows him a quality of consciousness which discerns the provisional nature of "appearances and realities". His head occasionally bumps against the ceiling set for it by the narrator, as when he ponders the ubiquitous schism in his "universe" between "being and seeming", but then opts for the *semblance* of a conclusion to his search for Mr Green (105). His notion of "a reality which doesn't depend on consent but within which consent is a game", the reality from which he retreats when he derives Mr Green's "being" from his "seeming", can be read as pointing towards the "realities" constructed in fictions such as *Augie March* and *Invisible Man*, novels in which the central character plays the "game" of consensus reality ("LMG", 105). But Grebe's grasp of his universe is too loose, his vision too lacking in perspicacity, for him to be admitted to the game as a player. He remains a pawn, a middleman circumscribed by irony, an "illustration".

Augie March and Ellison's *Invisible Man* both seek to elude, in their storytelling as in their lives, the dreaded role to which Grebe succumbs, that of the go-between. They stake their claims to their

histories with such conviction that they seem to frustrate the reader's attempts to place a fix upon them, to use their characters as means of access to some significance separable from their selves. Even as they extend themselves in the act of narration towards their notional audiences they react against the potential consequences of such expenditure. They attempt to conceal themselves behind their revelations, to position themselves as Mr Green is positioned, concealed from "observation", yet situated at the centre of the text which bears his name. Augie's dread of the disappointed life, in which can be seen "the hardening of detestable character, like bone", has implications for his narratorial practice, in which he risks *giving himself away* (Joseph's greatest fear), allowing the imprisonment of his self within a "second skeleton" of "character" (255). From this anxiety stems the stress, in *Invisible Man* as in *Augie March*, on the performative aspect of first-person narration. To maintain their distance from their audiences' powers of "observation", to remain on their guard against co-option by the "specialized intelligences" around them, the narrators need to stage-manage their own involvement in storytelling, make plain their mastery over, and freedom to withdraw from, the performances they have undertaken. Making their presences known, they simultaneously assert their right to absence, their ability to move at will *behind the scenes*.

Invisible Man makes explicit an anxiety which *Augie March* only implies. Augie, grappling with the "external life (...) mighty" in its power, composed in part by a plurality of "performances so great", sees the necessity for each individual to build for himself a persona fit to face it, to "invent a man who can stand before the terrible appearances" (401/2). Once engaged in the "struggle of humanity, that is, each man's attempts "to recruit other people to play a supporting role and sustain him in his make-believe", one enters the zone in which the "invention" is taken for the "actual", in which one must strive not towards the reclamation of "actuality" but instead "to recruit others to your version of what's real" (402). Such is the world as Allbee found it, in which opposing "authorships" vie for supremacy. Thus, Augie's autobiographical monologue recapitulates the story of his life in more ways than one, in that its construction of a particular "version of what's real" involves the construction of a voice which must preserve its authenticity in the midst of competing "inventions". Augie hangs back, however, from confronting the threat posed by his notional audience's "versions of

the real", from challenging his audience's capacity to reify him as an "object lesson" himself. Ellison's invisible man directly addresses this problem, and his overt references to the contours produced by the meeting of narrating and reading intelligences illuminate the principle of evasion by which Augie March "lives" in both his world and his narration.

Augie March figures himself as a free agent invites his audience to picture him as a comically peripatetic wanderer - "look at me, going everywhere", he concludes, demanding that his audience remember him this way (536). The "observation" which he courts is recognition of his autonomous drive through life (at the novel's end, his car stalled in the French countryside, he continues imperturbably on foot). Ellison's narrator finds himself unable to lay claim to such an autonomy, haunted as he is by the persistent spectre of *eviction*. Despatched, in some disgrace, from his southern *alma mater* to New York, the invisible man becomes involved in political intrigue after witnessing, and spontaneously provoking a protest against, an eviction of black tenants by white hired hands on the streets of Harlem. Taken on by the communist "Brotherhood" as an orator and potential leader of his "people", he speaks on behalf of those "DISPOSSESSED" by capitalism (*IM*, 301, 346). But his activism is itself a "dispossession", an "eviction" of his autonomous voice, in that he mouths the tenets of the Brotherhood while being manipulated by it for its own ends. *Invisible Man* is structured around a series of speeches, each of which is in part a rehearsal, implicitly a prototype, for the monologue which constitutes the novel itself. The invisible man encounters a host of fraudulent speechifiers, and delivers some bogus rhetoric of his own (although not *entirely* "his own") before, in the prologue and epilogue to his tale, he arrives at the extreme limit of his central anxiety, at which point, testing the soundness of his claim to a "first-person" voice, detects the workings of another voice behind his own.

"Eviction" is the paradigm of the invisible man's version of what's real. Whatever "stature" he may claim "without exaggeration" for himself is ineluctably undercut by the pervasive process of "dispossession". Those keenest to tell, such as Homer Barbee and Brother Jack, two orators whom the invisible man discovers to be respectively blind and one-eyed, are those least able to see. This

rule implicitly extends to Ellison's narrator himself in that by involving himself in narration, he risks both exposure as a fraud and a diminution of his power to perceive, sharing in the condition of the blind, "moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices" (*IM*, 50). Even his motivation, his desire to instruct his audience in "what was really happening when your eyes were looking through", is perhaps not his own as, "who knows but that, on the lower frequencies I speak for you?" (*IM*, 581). Disenfranchised as he is of "substance", "being invisible", even his status as a "disembodied voice" is called into question by the ubiquity of ventriloquizing agencies, including among their number the audience itself (*IM*, 581). *Invisible Man's* concluding words reveal its narrator to be looking askance, slightly aghast, at what he has risked, contemplating his tale's treacherous potential as a *document*, a chronicle of "black experience", open to readings in which the first-person voice which he claims as his irreducible own is absorbed into a politically determined plural, thus co-opted, enclosed, and enslaved. While *Invisible Man* is undoubtedly about the ineluctable modality of racism in Ellison's America, the novel itself warns its audience away from reading it as primarily a document of social ills.

Augie March's engagement with the political will be addressed in the next of this chapter's sections. But here it must be noted that Bellow's novel lacks the atmosphere of intolerable pressure with which Ellison's is imbued. The invisible man is never far from violent retaliation against an environment which is structured as a *provocation*; the "observation" which dogs Augie's steps is of a less baleful aspect than that which pursues the invisible man, in whose night sky the moon is "a white man's bloodshot eye" (*IM*, 110). Emerson's disembodied eye surfaces intermittently in *Invisible Man* but never without a pronounced opacity, a whiteness shot through with, and hungry for, blood, as seen in the "protruding, luminous and veined" eye of a scientist experimenting on the invisible man's mind in a laboratory of "clinical whiteness", and in the "harsh red rawness" concealed by the "polished and humane facade" of Brother Jack's glass eye (*IM*, 235, 507). The "science" of the Brotherhood sees life as "all pattern and discipline", and although both Augie and the invisible man are in flight from "pattern and discipline", Augie need not fear the prospect of a literal enslavement by them (*IM*, 382). After Thea splits from him, Augie leaves Mexico because he feels that "I couldn't hold my own

against it any more"; Augie's "own" is threatened but intact and he is not moved to doubt that it is truly *his* (418). Similarly, his dread of being caught in "one of those great currents where I can't be myself" expresses his confidence in the existence of a "self" which he can "be" (416). Beilow has been moved to speak of the modern novel as "a sort of latter-day lean-to, a hovel in which the spirit takes shelter", as a structure (albeit of potential unsoundness) resting on dry land, providing its tenant consciousness with an *inside* from which to contemplate the *outside*, secure, for the time being, against eviction.¹⁶ Ellison's "raft", a more precarious refuge, lacks the luxuries of makeshift foundations and shielding walls, and floats atop the encroaching flux itself.

Ellison's narrator is "invisible" insofar as he cannot find within himself the resources to construct an effective obstacle to the persistence of "observation". He feels as an affront, more keenly than does Augie, the ease with which he is "looked through", with which his stature and his presence are discounted. His monologue constitutes his attempt to stay the dissolving power of that gaze, to set a limit to its power, but it is an attempt profoundly troubled by a sense of its own inauthenticity, and by a pessimistic estimation of "observation's" ubiquity, and multiplicity of disguises. Augie March - to whose own "authenticity" I now turn - is not so readily given to those anxieties which beset the invisible man, but then, Augie seeks not to negate "observation" but to trick it, to direct its attention away from his essential self by means of showmanship, to turn what he learns of its methods back upon itself.

4.2 Inauthenticity

I have noted previously the presence in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, of partially occluded centres of gravity, located in figures such as Iva, Mickey, and Libbie, apparently peripheral to the matters most immediately at hand but in truth repositories of significance, indices of authenticity, around whom the novel, and, unknowingly, the central characters also, arrange themselves. Augie March, however, despite the concerted efforts of various heavy influences to unseat him, seems to be the nearly uncontested centre of his tale. There is a dearth of the sort of self-reflexive ironies which systematically conspired to expose the facade of Joseph's "autonomy". Augie speaks of the "axial

lines of life (...) with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is mere clownery", numinous harbingers of "truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony"; which bring those open to alignment "into focus" (454/5). In the earlier novels as in most of Bellow's subsequent fiction, "axial lines" are present as a feature of his design which convicts, rather than liberates, the central character, rather in the manner of the spectral geometric patterns which frame the subject of many a Francis Bacon portrait, implying the supremacy of an order in which the foregrounded figure is in truth anomalous, powerless and peripheral. Structures of this kind are at work in *Augie March* also, but do not cohere, in their ultimate configuration, around Augie himself.

Augie's story is built out of his various brushes with variations on the *institution*, structures which endeavour to shape what they touch into finished products conforming to their own sets of laws. His youth is spent either inside or too close to such dubious establishments as the orphanage, the house of correction, and the poolroom. One of his first recollections is of Georgie running "dragfooted with his stiff idiot's trot, up and down along the curl-wired fence in the backyard" (3). Not only does Georgie lack the physical mobility put to frequent use by Augie, but the "backyard" of the family home is synecdochic of the recurrence of strict boundaries set for Georgie throughout his life to come. He attends a "penal-looking school" rivalled in size locally only by a nearby "icehouse" and a "casket factory", houses of stasis and death (15/6). He is later moved to a Home with a capital "H", which features "wired windows, dog-proof cyclone fence, asphalt yard", combining the March home's "comforts" with the school's "great gloom inside of clinks the world over" (57, 16). While Georgie is condemned to inhabit literally such an "institution", Simon March voluntarily consigns himself to a less obvious kind of imprisonment, through his eagerness for material success won through business, an objective which necessitates his unhappy marriage to Charlotte Magnus. Positioning himself as the Magnus family's adopted "prince", Simon clowns before his in-laws as part of the "dramatic self-presentation" which nominates him as their heir apparent (216/7). His voluntary "metamorphosis" involves a "hardening of detestable character", his "second skeleton" taking on physical form in the "enamel shell" of his "black Cadillac" (255, 422).

Like his brothers, Augie appears to have an innate talent for attracting the attention of heavy influences. As the central character in a Bellow novel, he must also cope with the strains of "institutional" metaphor with which his world is limned, themselves avatars of "the terror that does not welcome your being", which aims to reduce "personality" into "types" (402/3). Augie's friend Clem Tambow claims that Augie is "not concrete enough" for his life to gather a proper momentum, that his ambitions are so diffuse as to lack the potential of their fulfilment (434). Augie's response is that he is no "specialist", that he refuses to "go die in one subdivided role or another, with one or two thoughts, these narrow, persistent ideas of your function" (436). Augie's refusal of the "concrete", of the end which disguises itself as a means, is a recognition and refusal of the Mosbyesque, and in his employment of such terms in the service of such a sentiment Augie's voice seems to merge with that of his author, adhering to the axial line of Bellow's own beliefs. His words are a recapitulation of the values declared by Bellow in his review of *Invisible Man*; Augie desires to *live* according to the principle by which Bellow's modern novelist desires to *write*. His author equips him with the ability to see the true nature of the influences attracted magnetically towards him, allows him a kind of novelistic consciousness.

From this point, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* appear as variations on the theme of *writer's block*. Joseph seals himself within his "tiny square" of words, and there finds himself *blocked* from the possibility of writing himself back to the world (*DM*, 158). Leventhal's block, his incapacity to share in the consumption and production of art, renders him passively prey to those better versed in its techniques. The novels in which they exist (considering the greater freedom accessible to Augie, they perhaps merely *subsist*) are solid (or, perhaps stolid) pieces of architecture, fictions possessing a perfection of coherence beyond their central characters' comprehension. Bellow has spoken of the relative ease with which he wrote *Augie March*, of its composition as a matter of being "there with buckets to catch it".¹⁷ It "rushed out" of its author, who was in "an enthusiastic state".¹⁸ The absence of obstacles between Bellow and the progress of his work is reflected in the absence of the expected structures dividing Bellow from his hero, a spontaneous remission of more than one type of "block".

Consequently, the element of the "deeply readable" detectable in Augie's world is relatively weak, a trace outline of its former Mephistophelian stature. There is, for instance, some significance routed through a strain of dental imagery, but without the cannibalistic import with which it was weighted in *Dangling Man*. Clem Tambow's teeth are ruined, the March family's neighbour Velma Klein is missing one, and Augie's first love Hilda Novinsson has "'lousy teeth'" according to her detractors (47, 38, 48). Grandma Lausch, who grips her cigarette holder with her gums, lives in fear of the dentist's dispensary, the one institution that can inspire fear and awe in her (7). Augie's mother has "very few of her teeth left - to heed the knocks as they came", a qualification which harks back to Augie's opening remarks on his "freestyle" method of recall - "first to knock first admitted" - in which the truth will out "in the end", because "there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles" (4, 3). He observes, on returning from Mexico, that he is missing a couple of teeth, "kissed" as he has been "by the rocky face of clasping experience" (447). Speech and laughter (Augie is particularly given to the latter activity, the "*animal ridens*" within him "forever rising up") reveal the state in which the mouth's owner has been left by life, allowing Augie's eye an insight into the personal history inscribed there in the human body's hardest outcrops (536). The wear and tear show how friction is brought to bear upon the self however concrete, or plastic, the self has been styled. Although there are occasional intimations of a pathological edge to the recurrence of oral imagery, such as the description of Lausch's "dark little gums between which all her guile, malice and command issued", and the reference made at the novel's end to the "red snare" of Jacqueline the maid's mouth, such details never gather the obsessive momentum witnessed at work in Joseph's mind, or generate any particularly misogynist charge (7, 536).

The "deeply readable" impinges intermittently upon Augie's world, but it never properly adheres to him. "Deep reading" involves the construction of a family tree of sorts, in that it traces the genealogy of the meaning which it pursues, insistent upon the thorough mapping of significance's constituent parts. Augie evades absorption into its classificatory systems with the same skill he displays in

slipping out from beneath the appellations foisted upon him by his mother's cousin Anna Coblin (for whom Augie is "my own boy", fated to be "my daughter's husband, *mein kind!*"), by the maternally inclined Mrs Renling (for whom he is a nascent "Augie Renling"), and by Charlotte Magnus's sister Lucy (who "already called me husband" in the course of his ambivalent courtship of her, 17, 151, 244). He is not so hysterical as to fear that he will be consumed by these women, but has a justifiable worry that he will be *renamed* by them. Unwilling to surrender or augment his own necessary and sufficient name, Augie guards against the advances made on it by colonizing epithets eager to incorporate it into their own familial sets of terms and roles. "Augie March" is his inviolable symbolic fortification against the claims made upon him by both "deep reading" and the love of women. It is only when he allows himself to fall for Thea Fenchel that his name is subverted by means of the "eagle"/"*aguila*" pun, and subjected to ironic distortion.

Sarah Blacher Cohen comments unfavourably on the figure cut by Augie, arguing that he appears to us as a cartoon character rather than as an actual human being.¹⁹ She has got this half-right, in that Augie's seeming lack of solidity is not, as she has it, indicative of the novel's shortcomings, but an impression, correctly received of what Augie truly *is*, and of his strategy in dealing with the infractions made upon his character by influence and inheritance. As a child, Augie marvels at the thought of those whose resilience attains the level of a physical plasticity; gangsters "who had had surgery on their faces, acid on their fingertips", "carrying brow-marks or mutilated thumbs and slit ears and noses" (44/5). He notes with approval that numerous beatings taken by his friend Dingbat have failed to "squelch" him (62). Augie himself desires to be *animated*, to possess both a vital self-determination and a fluidity of form. But he must avoid becoming a mere "illustration", a *caricature*. His pessimistic friend Mimi Villars claims that "most people (...) suffer from what they are", that "they can't change", that they get "stuck" with "their truth" (254/5). Augie's reply is that he "couldn't think it was all so poured in concrete" (*sic*), although he concurs with a variation on the same theme expounded by another acquaintance, Kayo Obermark (35). Kayo's contention is that each individual pursues "bitterness in his chosen thing", finds "real success (...) terrifying" and accordingly "acts out this disappointment in his own way" (260). Mimi's humanity tends towards

stasis, there to decompose within its self-imposed limits, while Kayo's lapses into parodic repetition ("people have the same kind of thing happen to them, over and over and over") (259). Mimi's humanity is animated only in its decay, and Kayo's is trapped in a loop, engaged for its duration in repeating the same set of bathetic manoeuvres. These versions of what's real are indirect challenges to Augie's account of himself as the irrepressible devotee of the "axial lines"; is he, in truth, "concrete" himself? Is he, ultimately, a victim of his own closed system, a creature of entropic habit?

My contention is that while the "disappointment" of which Kayo speaks does not eventually descend upon Augie, his optimism remaining intact, but implicitly pervades the novel, an abiding presence concealed from Augie's view and, perhaps, from Bellow's also. At the novel's end, there is nothing in the text to counter Augie's climactic description of himself as a "Columbus of those near-at-hand", and it seems that we should take him at his word (536). But there is a falseness in his concluding affirmation, a detectable strain in its utterance, caused by the tension cumulatively generated between Augie's point of view and the nature of the "near-at-hand", of that which he has been *given* to view. The world of *Augie March* begins to loosen itself, in its later pages, from Augie's grasp, shifting beyond the limits of his capacity for "observation", not quite cohering into a refutation of his version of what's real but nevertheless exposing its shortcomings, revealing that Augie's eyes are doing their share of "looking through".

The emergent "disappointment" has its roots in Augie's historical sense, his positioning of himself in relation to cultural and political realities. Mindful of the "great currents" of history, he feels diminished by the contexts in which they place him; he writes of how, in "an ancient place like Venice or in Rome, passing along the side of majestic walls where great men once sat" he "experienced what it was to be simply a dot, a speck that scans across the cornea a corpuscle, almost white almost nothing but air" (238). This variety of invisibility holds no appeal for him; the insignificance of his stature when measured on such a vertiginous scale removes him so completely from "observation" - sets him drifting from its "cornea" - that he is unable to challenge its gaze. As the novel proceeds, this problematic perspective comes ever closer to the fore, insinuated through

Augie's perusal in Mexico of an anthology of writings on utopian themes, through his short-lived employment as a researcher, once returned to Chicago, by the "screwloose millionaire" and amateur historian Robey (who, like most of Augie's would-be mentors, requires his services chiefly as "a listener") and, most nakedly in the scheme proposed to Augie towards the end of his sojourn in Mexico (356, 442, 444). The plan, hatched by Hooker Frazer, a politically committed but morally irresponsible intellectual, is that Augie masquerades as Trotsky's "nephew" to complement the "formerly so mighty and commanding man's" disguise as a tourist on holiday in Mexico (416). Augie's refusal to participate is motivated partly by the "loony" quality of the enterprise, and partly by his disinclination to be "flattered by the chance to be with this giant historical personality, speeding around the mountains" (417). But while he is "struck (...) very hard" by the notion that a man of such stature "should have to alter and humble himself", the effect that this near miss with history has upon *Augie March* itself is rather different (416). However "loony" Frazer's plan may be, and however misconceived the versions of what is, or might be, real proposed by Robey and the utopians, Augie's world is made subject to the gravitational force of *possibility*, and his horizons begin to appear limited, in the sense that a man "going everywhere" might be seen to be going *nowhere*, unable to site himself meaningfully in any of his points of rest.

At this stage in the novel, the fanciful having established itself in Augie's adventures, the fantastic makes its presence known. Augie has balked at the prospects of the world as proposed by high-flown utopians and by hard-bitten cynics; Thea rejects him because, partly, of his failure to conform to "her eccentricity" which desires "a different kind of humanity altogether", one without flaw or foible (379). He now has an even heavier influence to deal with, in the form of the future according to Nazism, a "fate nobody could escape", in which "this same earth's surface" is populated by a "bug-humanity (...) as weird as the threatening universe outside" (457/8). Augie, in the grip of a small-scale utopian fancy, has returned to Chicago planning vaguely "to set up a kind of home and teach school", to provide a safe haven for his mother, for George, and for "kids from institutions who have had it rough"; such a separate peace would not be permitted in the Nazi's "universal ant heap" (456, 457). And the inescapable future seems to be immanent in Chicago itself, as seen from the rooftops,

in its "repetition" which "exhausted your imagination of details and units", and in its capacity to bring its observer to recognition of his insignificance: "as before the work of Egypt and Assyria, as before a sea, you're nothing here. Nothing" (459). Augie's subsequent enlistment in the Navy thus recapitulates Joseph's "surrender" to the military, in that it resembles a retreat more truly than it resembles an advance; Augie is in flight from a hometown grown monstrous, which has acquired - as did Leventhal's New York - a foreboding and fantastic aspect, the patina of accommodating "reality" elided to reveal the unwelcoming truth beneath.

Augie's attempt to combat this evil as concentrated in the form of the Nazi threat is frustrated by the torpedo which sinks his ship off the Canaries. Nevertheless, marooned in a boat, Augie has his desired confrontation; the boat's other occupant, Basteshaw, is a variation on Augie's most detested theme, a mad self-styled scientist eager to exert his own power of "influence", to employ science to institute globally a "bug-humanity" of his own invention. Basteshaw claims to have "discovered some of the secrets of life", and has been experimenting with protoplasm in order to bring about "'a new chain of evolution'" (505, 506). The scene unfolds on the surface of the primordial soup from which Basteshaw's projected life-forms will emerge, several of his cultures supposedly having gone down with the ship. Basteshaw's malevolence is "influence" in its most distilled form, his new biology a metaphor for the misanthropy exhibited by the likes of Lausch, Thea, and Simon, their insistence upon the universal application of their versions of what's real restated as a science fiction pipedream. Augie, being "'dead against doing things to the entire human race'", refuses to participate in Basteshaw's grand plan and in the ensuing fight is overpowered by the latter's "immense weight", "heavy as brass" (509, 510). He is "ready for the end" and is very nearly squelched; he is obliged to realize the limits to his resilience, the implication of Basteshaw's theorizing and violence both being that plasticity involves vulnerability to distortion, to being altered beyond recognition (510).

Although Augie frees himself through stealth from this particular predicament, there persist other influences from which he does not escape, and which are, perhaps, beyond his comprehension. Clem

Tambow, with reference to Simon's adulterous habits, argues that the "double life" - "double if not more" - is "practically the law of the land", an idea expanded upon by the businessman Mintouchian, for whom each individual's identity conceals that of which it is truly comprised, "secret over secret, mystery over mystery, and then infinity signs stuck on to that" (460, 482). While the novel concurs with Augie's assessment of Basteshaw as a "maniac", and thus relieves the reader of the duty to take the mad scientist's claims seriously, the notion of the life "doubled" and "doubled" again, towards an innumerable plurality of selves which renders its central essence unknowable even to that essence itself, is a cell culture which grows implacably beneath the surface of *Augie March's* later pages. Tambow and Mintouchian herald the Bellovian version of what's real, the mystery of the "particular forms" (as contemplated by Dr Braun in "The Old System") in which "character" situates itself, or is situated, for good or ill. The structural peculiarity of this - that Augie does not himself arrive at such an insight, but instead has it expounded to him by not one but two minor characters - is similar to the device employed by Melville in *Moby-Dick*, in which the determined common sense and equanimity of "Ishmael" prove to be occasionally insufficient to the narration's requirements, and the novel takes its leave of its central character's voice. In *Augie March*, ultimately there is a sense in which Augie's voice acts as a "block" upon "Bellow's", that is, upon the characteristic and authoritative vision which pervades Bellow's oeuvre. In this, Augie exhibits an inauthenticity which has less to do with his voice being co-opted and ventriloquized than it does with his voice being found wanting and, accordingly, sidelined.

Augie's narratorial control over his material begins to waver; his account of himself fragments as he becomes an increasingly passive conduit for his recollections ("I see before me next a fellow named Mintouchian"), themselves intimations of a larger Bellovian scheme (477). He seems unable to summon salient details concerning Stella, the woman he marries towards his story's end, although "she felt obliged to tell me all she could about herself", he has to ask himself "what else", beyond superficialities, there is to be remembered (476). He becomes the centre which cannot hold its sway over its history, nor its position in narration. His eventual effacement is the end product of his principle of plasticity, in that in his fervent escapology there is a certain lack, or an excessive

flexibility of, *spine*. His rejection of involvement in the various families, schemes and political realities which assert their claims upon him seems to result in a kind of accidie, in withdrawal from a world dismissed as absurd. The choices presented to him are too simple, the plan of Trotsky's disguise being too silly for him to take it seriously, Basteshaw's ambition being that of a madman.

Augie March's greatest ingenuity is located in its creation of a discrete and "characterful" voice, one capable of carrying Bellow's desired "new sort of American sentence", in which are fused "colloquialism and elegance", but that voice, necessary as it may be to its author's project, proves insufficient.²⁰ Augie so successfully eludes absorption into the world which he depicts that he seems at the last to be barely connected to it at all, sharing the fate of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Wakefield, who "had contrived, or rather (...) had happened to dis sever himself from the world, - to vanish, - to give up his place and privileges with living men, without being admitted among the dead".²¹ Augie himself becomes the suppressed, occluded centre of *Augie March*, himself the thing held down; by the novel's end, he *adjoins* his world more than he truly lives in it.

* * *

Augie March carries over *The Victim's* reaction against its own hermetic and melodramatic elements, but in doing so suffers from a consequent attenuation of narrative potential, as it lacks the tensions generated by its predecessor's commitment to the confrontational. Incorporating into itself the figure of Kirby Allbee, *The Victim* knowingly, and properly, partakes in that against which it makes its declaration of values, by allowing the forces which would *negate* those values their space within the narrative. Like *Invisible Man*, *The Victim* addresses (albeit less explicitly) the prospect of its own *eviction*. *Augie March*, however, allows itself what seem to be evasions, peremptory reductions of the heavy influences with which it purports to engage to the level of caricature, the damnable aspect of its "clowning" subject to the law of diminishing returns. In *Dangling Man*, Bellow's structures close relentlessly in upon the central character, with a cartographer's determination to delineate wholly the contours of that character, and in doing so itself takes on Joseph's solipsistic aspect. *Augie March*, a novel concerned with the expansion of its central character's freedoms, suffers

eventually from the same rebarbative effect; it ultimately conforms too closely – although, as I have argued, it at some level knows better – to the character it depicts.

5. On *Seize The Day*

For Dr Tamkin, the charlatan sage of Bellow's fourth novel *Seize the Day*, "facts *always!* are sensational".¹ He claims to minister, as a semi-professional psychiatrist, to those lost souls around him who have lost sight of the extraordinary in their lives: "people forget how sensational the things are that they do. They don't see it on themselves. It blends into the background of their daily life", he argues, in the face of smiling skepticism from the novel's central character, Tommy Wilhelm (66). Like Wilhelm, the reader is aware that Tamkin is not to be trusted entirely - the "confidence" he enjoys in his business abilities is also a pointer towards his possibly duplicitous nature - but, as Wilhelm thinks to himself, "even a liar might be trustworthy in some ways" (37, 64, 57). Indeed, Tamkin's assertions hold true in Bellow's fictional worlds. The retreat of the "sensational" - the excitatory, the immediately perceptible - beyond the range of the senses and into an implicit presence in the central character's environment is one of Bellow's key fictional strategies. Meaning and truth accompany the Bellow protagonist through his narrative like persistent spirits, just outside the reach of his apprehension, seen but not recognized, heard but not listened to. Tamkin's professed aim, of "bringing people into the here-and-now", "the real universe", is akin to the aim of the narrative itself, to bring its readers to the here, the now, the reality of Tommy Wilhelm's universe (66).

The discussion quoted above is one of several conversations around which the first two-thirds of the novel are structured. Only towards the conclusion does the action move beyond the confines of the Gloriana, the New York hotel in which the characters are resident. On the morning on which the novel begins, Wilhelm is "almost at the end of his rope", having entrusted the last seven hundred dollars of his savings to Tamkin for investment in the commodities market; according to Tamkin, they are equal partners in the deal, but Wilhelm has more to lose (30). He cannot afford to pay his bills at the Gloriana, and is unable to meet the claims for alimony made by his wife Margaret, who is unwilling to agree to his pleas for a divorce. He dreads pleading, "in his middle forties" as he is, for financial assistance from his father, Dr Adler, also resident in the hotel, and correctly anticipates his father's refusal to help (4). Wilhelm accompanies Tamkin to the brokerage office and, after lunch,

returns to find that his investment has been wiped out, and that Tamkin has vanished. Angrily searching for his former partner back at the hotel, Wilhelm is driven further into distraction by a confrontation with his father and a phone conversation with Margaret. In the streets again, his fruitless pursuit of Tamkin brings him involuntarily to a funeral home, where he finds himself dissolving in tears before the corpse of a stranger lying in an open casket.

Frank D. McConnell sees "the matter-of-fact, coldly reductive narrative" of *Seize the Day* as the "black double" of *Augie March's* "stylistic brilliance", as a reaction against the expansive, improvisatory drive of its predecessor.² Indeed, the prose of *Seize the Day* may qualify as the most demonically overdetermined in Bellow's oeuvre, by virtue of its insistent imposition of bathetic frames around its central character, and by the free reign it gives to that ventriloquial force which *Augie March* endeavoured to prevent from overwhelming Augie's narrating voice. Tamkin's enthusiasm for the immanence of the fabulous within the mundane might appear to be an inappropriate response to a world such as Tommy Wilhelm's, replete as it is with partially submerged, and possibly malevolent, meanings. McConnell is mistaken, I would argue, in describing the narrative as "matter-of-fact"; it is, like *Dangling Man*, more *matter-of-fiction*, a structure within which certain reifying metaphors cohere into a system which, like a virus, infects and consumes whatever straightforward "facts" it meets in its path.

The most pronounced system of metaphor in *Seize the Day* is also that which is most frequently referred to by the novel's critics. Clinton W. Trowbridge traces the proliferation of water imagery through the text, and retrieves from it the notion that "Bellow's real theme" is "the paradoxical life by drowning"; as Wilhelm arrives in the funeral parlour, he is "imagined as a drowning body moving with the currents under the sea to its final resting place", in which "he can be 'drowned in tears' because these are the life-giving seas of feeling, not the terrifying Nietzschean wave of life and death".³ Trowbridge is followed in his optimistic interpretation of the novel's final scene by Irving Malin, for whom the lachrymose Wilhelm "cleanses himself", by M. Gilbert Porter, who sees it as being "a baptism, a rebirth", and by Jeanne Braham, for whom Wilhelm's concluding "healing

insight", framed as it is within an "elaborate baptism metaphor", indicates that he is to be "reborn into meaningful life".⁴ While no adequate account of *Seize the Day* can neglect the significances to be gleaned from the prominent strain of aquatic metaphors, nor can it allow itself to discount the ambiguity present in the novel's conclusion, which precludes the unambiguous conclusions at which these critics arrive. John Jacob Clayton asserts that "intangible truth avoids Tommy Wilhelm just as final understanding of the novel avoids the reader", and goes on to say that it is, perhaps, the essence of the Bellovian, that his works provide an "indication without definition" of "a significant pattern in human life".⁵

Clayton's argument, which recommends that our readings of Bellow remain tentative, observing the key distinction between "indication" and "definition", is a useful corrective to the critical tendency to project optimistic (or pessimistic) conclusions upon the ending of *Seize the Day*. The temptation to indulge in such projection is strong indeed, given the strange, screen-like opacity of the novel's final paragraph, but to do so would involve a vanity of apprehension; that very opacity, according to the reading which follows, must be respected for its function as, among other things, the structural seal that separates *Seize the Day* from our attempts to understand it.

5.1 In Flood

Wilhelm's submission to an overpowering and nameless emotion at the novel's end - he "sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" - is pictured in terms of a submersion in liquid: "the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him" (118). This concluding paragraph contains the most explicit instances of the water imagery which recurs throughout the novel from its first page, on which an elevator "sank and sank" through the floors of the hotel, eventually depositing its passenger Wilhelm on the mezzanine, where the carpet "billowed" towards his feet. But until the novel's end this pattern of imagery is secreted in the blended background to the plot's immediate concern with Wilhelm's ruin at the indifferent hands of "the world's business", precipitated by his doomed attempt to play the monetary game which

enriches "the heartless, flaunting, boisterous business class who ruled this country" (as Wilhelm's summary of Tamkin's contemptuous portrayal has it, 17, 36, 63). As in Bellow's previous novels, the strain of the "deeply readable" is woven through the text at a near-subliminal level. His fictions' overdetermining metaphors commonly lurk in idiomatic disguise. By attending to the set of idiomatic terms employed by *Seize the Day*, this reading aspires to divine whatever buried structure of meaning may lie beneath the seemingly ingenuous surface of the text.

When Wilhelm senses that his "day of reckoning" has arrived at last, he anticipates two kinds of worst case scenario "reckoning"; firstly, an imminent confrontation with the ultimate consequences of his mistakes, that is, a situation in which he will be held *accountable*, and secondly, the prospect of being *accounted for*, closed out of the market by "ultramodern electronic bookkeeping" (85, 96, 74). He looks back on a life gone wrong on the basis of "ten" bad decisions made in spite of "innumerable" wise resolutions (23). He sees himself, although currently without occupation, as being one of millions of men ensnared in marriage and "sold to the company" which employs them (49). He is compromised by his father's boasts that Wilhelm, as a corporate minion, had enjoyed an income "up in the five figures", and Dr Adler's acquaintance Mr Perls is suitably impressed that Wilhelm was once in "the thirty-two per cent bracket" of tax (36). Wilhelm's world has been corrupted by the ascendancy of a particular method of *accounting*, by which a price, or at very least a number, has been imposed on everything, in echo of Joseph's oscillation in *Dangling Man* between "1A" and "3A", and of his eventual submission to "regular hours". The difference is that *Seize the Day*'s proliferating reificatory systems are not reducible to hallucinations on the part of the central character; the "world's business" has Wilhelm's number, and proceeds implacably towards the cancellation of his account.

Numerical schemes, avatars of the world's business, surround Wilhelm. Towards the novel's end, Tamkin having proved to be an "operator", a crook, Wilhelm encounters further difficulties in the form of the "operator" of the hotel's switchboard, who seems to obstruct his efforts to locate Dr Adler and Tamkin (99, 106/7). Both kinds of "operator" deal in numbers, which must be privileged above

names if the world's business is to be best served. For some, having (or knowing) a phone number is enough, an end in itself rather than a means to communication; Tamkin talks of the two families of a bigamist, whose ten children, now adults, "never have met their half-brothers and sisters and don't want to. The whole bunch of them are listed in the telephone book" (97). Another significant numerical system arises in the discussion between Dr Adler and Mr Perls about the presence in the hotel of "queer elements"; one woman with an apparent excess of pets has been "moved down to twelve", while Wilhelm has a singing teacher as a neighbour on the twenty-third (34). Mr Perls is introduced by Dr Adler as "our neighbour (...). From the fifteenth floor", one floor above Dr Adler himself (31, 3). The Gloriana itself is situated "along Broadway in the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties", streets which correspond in their numberings to the ages of the majority of their inhabitants (4). In the midst of these numerical scales, Wilhelm is a no-account, unable to scrape together the rent which would ensure his position within the grid of the Gloriana's floor-plan; the sinking of the elevator at the novel's beginning anticipates his inevitable, and perhaps irreversible, descent from his tenancy on the twenty-third. Tamkin, who argues that "counting any number is always a sadistic activity", possibly overstates his case, but his observation apprehends the iniquity of the number systems at work in Wilhelm's New York (69).

Set within the rigid structures of the Gloriana is a swimming pool, "one of the finest (...) in New York" according to Dr Adler, but disliked by Wilhelm, who "did not care for the odor of the wall-locked and chlorinated water" (43). The water's confinement in the hotel's basement mirrors the situation of Wilhelm himself, the novel's emotional wellspring. The Gloriana's system of hierarchies has a sinister aspect to it, designed as it appears to be to control elements alien to itself. The woman discussed by Dr Adler and Mr Perls has been relocated by the hotel's "Austro-Hungarian" management, her own nationality being "Estonian" (30, 34). Dr Adler, much enamoured of the hotel's orderliness, recalls with distaste his only visit to Wilhelm's room, in which his son "lived in worse filth than a savage", apparently (37). Dr Adler "couldn't bear" such "dirty habits", and "never again, he swore" would he visit (36). But despite the evidently squalid conditions prevailing in Wilhelm's room, with its "smell of dirty clothes" and its unmade bed "kicked to pieces", and in spite

of the lameness of Wilhelm's excuse - "I have no wife to look after my things" - the scene offers a comic juxtaposition of Dr Adler's likeness to a cold fish with Wilhelm's vital, if slovenly, enthusiasms, "in pajamas and stockings (...) drinking gin from a coffee mug and rooting for the Dodgers on television" (36). Like the Estonian, who claims to be a "dear friend" of Dr Adler (who does not defend her against Mr Perl's disparagement), and like the water kept in stagnating order in the basement, Wilhelm cannot make a proper home for himself within the confining structures of the Gloriana.

Dr Adler appears to be more of an extension in human shape of the Gloriana itself than a father to his son. At breakfast, Wilhelm's first reference to his crisis causes his father to "measurably draw back" (45). The ensuing catalogue of woes elicits a contemptuous retort from Dr Adler, who insists that Wilhelm "get off" his "back", as, he insists, he is "still alive, not dead. (...) Life isn't over yet. I am as much alive as you or anyone" (55). This reiterated affirmation of personal vitality is undercut, however, in the final confrontation between father and son, in the health club adjacent to the pool (on emerging from the elevator, Wilhelm sees its "reflection [...] swirling green at the bottom of the lowest stairway", in sympathy with his own, increasingly turbulent, emotions, 107). Dr Adler again withdraws from the potential "contagion" of his now destitute son's "trouble": "I don't want to listen to the details (...). I'm too old to take on new burdens" (108). Dr Adler is presented figuratively in this scene as a greying corpse, from the moment when Wilhelm finds him lying, eyes closed, on a table, "his thighs (...) weak, the muscles of his arms (...) fallen" (108). When moved to anger, Dr Adler rises "and gathered the sheet over him as he did so", as if being roused from death only to draw the shroud back over himself (110). "His mouth opened wide, dark, twisted" as he rejects his son: "you want to make yourself into my cross (...). I'll see you dead, Wilky, by Christ, before I let you do that to me" (110). All that Dr Adler's "pale, slight body" can, or will, carry is its own belly, "round, white and high. It had its own being, like something separate", indicative not only of its host's well-fed well-being but also of his moral cancer, a symbol of his death-in-life (108). He lies on the slab being served by the masseur "absorbed in his work", attending to the body as if preparing it for burial or, in line with Dr Adler's wishes as previously expressed, cremation (109,

34). The Gloriana is, it might appear, a metaphoric variation on the funeral home into which Wilhelm is propelled at the novel's end. Dr Adler's retreat into the bowels of the hotel - removing himself from Wilhelm, resident on the twenty-third floor, both emotionally and physically - allows his final appearance to be flooded with "deeply readable" significance. Dr Adler is able enough to live without his wife; although he has a good head for numbers in monetary matters, he cannot recall the date of her death - his first guess is wide of the mark by three years - and when Wilhelm informs him that a seat next to her grave has been vandalized, he is reluctant to pay for repairs, as he, after all, will not be buried beside her (27, 34). But he *is* unable, he says, to "live without my massages and steam" (44). As he distances himself from the fluid instability exhibited by Wilhelm, he is incorporated into the furniture, inert and ironized, of the hotel itself (as prefigured by the deep "wrinkles beside his ears", a detail which connects him to the enamel, "streaming with wrinkles", of the Gloriana's windows, 38, 31).

In Wilhelm's New York, humanity is busy reifying itself into "stone, iron", Mosbyesque form. Dr Adler is the most oppressive of a series of rigid figures of authority, which includes also the manager of the brokerage office, "a cold, mild lean German who dressed correctly", "an extremely correct person" on closer inspection, "silvery, cool, level, long-profiled, experienced, indifferent, observant", the only vestige of humanity remaining in his appearance being his "unshaven refinement" (59/60). Towards the novel's conclusion, Wilhelm finds himself being carried along in a crowd, the movements of which are controlled by policemen, one of whom, "clutching his nightstick at both ends, like a rolling pin", shoves into Wilhelm's "belly and ribs" as if our hero were no more than pliant dough (116). Such figures register Wilhelm's as being the most minimal of presences; the office manager, his mind on the fluctuations in price of commodities, seems to note grudgingly, rather than acknowledge consciously, Wilhelm's arrival in the office; his face "acted as a unit of perception; his eyes merely did their reduced share" (60). The policeman, having "been ordered to keep a way clear", devotes his impersonal attention to the movements of the crowd (116). As the narrative closes in upon Wilhelm's ultimate crisis, he is rendered as being ever more marginal a member of society, excluded from the considerations of others, invisible.

"Almost at the end of his rope", Wilhelm shares in Joseph's dilemma, while Leventhal's troubling liquidity is recapitulated in Wilhelm's excessive fluidity (in financial as in emotional matters; he feels that, at the mercy of Margaret's demands for maintenance, he has "flowed", "bled", and "hemorrhaged" money, 40). Wilhelm's New York, with its "fake air of gas visible at eye level", itself "like a gas", might appear to be a variation on the urban hells already visited in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* (74, 50). But for Steven Marcus, *Seize the Day's* representation of city life differs significantly from those to be found in Bellow's previous novels: "part of the classical representation of the modern city was that it embodies, among other things, a structure of systems of communication", whereas in Wilhelm's New York "the city is ceasing to be readable", is "ceasing to speak in a language".⁶ Ralph Freedman places *Seize the Day* as marking the point in Bellow's writing at which "the minute examination of consciousness against the background of the external world is supplanted by a human charade played against the scenery of a spurious environment", a shift in direction continued in *Henderson the Rain King*.⁷ Our readings of Bellow's earlier novels have attempted to decode the "languages" spoken by the environments portrayed within, and have found them to be "readable" indeed, due in no small part to the proliferation of the "spurious" throughout them. *Contra* Marcus and Freedman, Wilhelm's New York is no less comprehensible than Leventhal's, its overdetermining power making itself manifest frequently and aggressively. The difference between the two versions of the same metropolis is that, where the environment of *The Victim* is as *protean* as its villain Allbee, the environment of *Seize the Day* is engaged in a process of *petrification*, its various "languages" cohering into a completed pattern from which Wilhelm will be excluded.

Wilhelm's own vision of New York as "the end of the world" presages his exile from its discourses:

Every other man spoke a language entirely his own (...). You had to translate and translate, explain and explain, back and forth, and it was the punishment of hell itself not to understand or be understood, not to know the crazy from the sane, the wise from the fools, the young from the old or the sick from the well. (83/4)

The categories of "crazy" and "sane" are inapplicable in a Babel such as New York, in which language has been removed from public ownership, in which a different set of obscure rules apply in

each verbal transaction. Wilhelm's estrangement from "understanding" is rendered all the more poignant by his tendency, in an apparently unconscious effort to speak a language not "entirely his own", to adapt his speech according to the terms employed by others. When Mr Perls refers to Florida as "Fairyland", Wilhelm answers with an anecdote which begins with the words "'once upon a time'" (while his observations on "language" seem to be prompted by Mr Perls's earlier remark that Tamkin might be "'both sane and crazy'", as "'in these days nobody can tell for sure which is which'", 39, 41). Dr Adler's rejection over breakfast of Wilhelm's pleas for help - "'I want nobody on my back. Get off!'" - seems to influence the insensitive wording of Wilhelm's subsequent note requesting assistance with his rent: *"Dear Dad, Please carry me this month. Yours, W."* (55, 74). Wilhelm's words on "the punishment of hell" follow on from a discussion with Tamkin of an apparent death-wish prevalent in modern society, in which Tamkin argues that "'all suicide is murder and all murder is suicide'" (71). Man, in killing, strikes at a world which he sees as an external manifestation of his inner corruption, that is, the triumph within him of "'the pretender soul'" over "'the true soul'", his aggression being therefore an attempt "'to slay the soul in him which has gypped and deceived him'" (70/1). Tamkin's phraseology sows a seed of infernal imagery in Wilhelm's thoughts, being taken to imply that "'the world is full of murderers. So it's not the world. It's a kind of hell'" (71).

All these vocabularies - with the possible exception of Tamkin's, to which we shall return later - to which Wilhelm defers are themselves "pretenders", their speakers all corrupt and disingenuous in their chatter. Wilhelm recalls a truer language, unsullied by words, which he had heard in "the long phrases of the birds" in the garden of a rented apartment in Roxbury (82). His younger self had enjoyed, if only figuratively, a mastery of this purer form of communication: "his father used to say that (...) he could charm a bird out of a tree" (6). But the world's business has silenced that voice, his "charm" diverted into his work in sales. The younger Wilhelm had embarked on an abortive career as a Hollywood actor, and his eventual aphasia is prefigured in his final screen appearance, in which, as an extra, he plays a bagpiper who "blew and blew and blew and not a sound came out", because "of course all the music was recorded" (89). This wasted effort leaves him with an intermittent "chest weakness", which might be read as a lack, as a "need", in his heart (89). His power of song

expunged, Wilhelm is left to deal in, and with, mere words. While he yearns for "one word" of support from his father, Tamkin, more wisely, knows that if the two have "had some words" then there has been a disagreement (109, 61). In contrast to Wilhelm's strenuous attempts to connect, there stands Rubin, the Gloriana's newsagent, who "didn't want to hear" Wilhelm's conversational overtures at the novel's beginning, being "the kind of man who knew, and knew and knew" (6). Human speech is hot air, bad breath, as "gassy" as what passes for oxygen on Broadway (115). Language has acquired an evanescent, increasingly irrelevant character in Wilhelm's New York; in such a poisonous context, his words are like bubbles "blown" only to burst on the surface of his waters.

Seize the Day dramatizes the conflict between the ubiquitous, and solidifying, structures of the world's business and the upsurge within Tommy Wilhelm of an oppositional, if hopeless, fluidity. The narrative traces this struggle's progress as though straining to see through a depth of water; on the novel's third page, the Hotel Gloriana's neighbour the Ansonia appears as "the image of itself reflected in deep water, white and cumulous above, with cavernous distortions underneath", while the narrative's conclusion attempts to follow Wilhelm's descent "past words, past reason, coherence" (5, 117). The novel's language strives to represent a central character and an environment notable, on occasion, for their opacities, and for the indeterminacy of their outlines. When the narrating voice, exhibiting the Bellovian tendency towards overdetermination, comments on the "depths in Wilhelm not unsuspected by himself", or on how he feels the focus of his attention "flowing into another channel", *Seize the Day* incorporates its central character into its central stratum of metaphor while simultaneously indicating the particular attribute, of fluidity, which will allow that character to escape that voice's schematizing reach (56, 57). As the world's business "numbers" Wilhelm, so various oppressive or ambiguous authorities (Dr Adler, Tamkin, the narrator) attempt to "name" him, to confine his fluid essence within a verbal space.

5.2 *A Name in Lights*

Dr Adler's prestige among his fellow residents of the Gloriana is evident; for Rubin, he is an "old gentleman", for Tamkin, a "fine old gentleman", and in general this "fine old scientist" is "idolized by everyone" (5, 61, 12, 11). But for Wilhelm, Dr Adler's behaviour shows a preference for social niceties over moral concerns; "style was the main consideration" in Dr Adler's dealings with Mr Perls, as it is elsewhere, as for instance when he requires Wilhelm to "play along" at breakfast, so that their confrontation has the appearance of "an ordinary conversation between a middle-aged man and his respected father" (35, 50). Wilhelm's awareness of his father's deceptions is underwritten by the narrator's own comments on Dr Adler's "completeness of style" in the public eye (50). The undeserved renown in which Dr Adler is held is part of a thematic strain running through *Seize the Day* which Allan Chavkin, quoting a phrase from Bellow's own notations to the novel's first draft, identifies as "the Hollywood thread", the recurring implication that Wilhelm's life and world have been polluted by the workings of North America's dream factory.⁸ Wilhelm's fellow New Yorkers aspire towards the condition of the two-dimensional, as exemplified by the seamless Adlerian persona. Wilhelm lacks such skills in the presentation of self; a screen test in Hollywood reveals "peculiarities, otherwise unnoticeable", his "photogenic" qualities cancelled out by a "thickness of speech which the sound track exaggerated" (thus amplifying the shortcomings of his "song", as it were) and by his failure to "look strong under the lights" (23). Wilhelm experiences extreme discomfort before such "lights", as when he is exposed to his father's scorn in the "sharply brilliant" breakfast room "overfull" of sunlight, or when he feels the sun glaring down on Broadway as an "actual weight", or when he reacts to a poem written by Tamkin "as though a charge of photographer's flash powder had gone up in his eyes" (55, 42, 115, 75).

Wilhelm's residency in the Gloriana, with its "dark-tinted mirrors, kind to people's defects", might appear to be an attempt to take refuge from such shaming illumination, to limit his indignities to those visited upon him in his ritualistic arguments with his father (105). But the Gloriana, which rises above a "movie house directly underneath the lobby", offers no hiding place from the "lights" (4). At one point Wilhelm peers at his reflection in a glass cupboard, trying "to allow for the darkness and deformations of the glass", and thus arrive at an accurate picture of his own

appearance; the Gloriana's discretion concerning its inhabitants' "defects" is a purely cosmetic effect, and one dependent upon the inhabitants' complicity in the ongoing evasion of self-awareness (6). And even if Wilhelm seeks to conceal what he thinks of as a *deformity*, he cannot escape his own apprehension of it; "the peculiar burden of his existence lay upon him like an accretion, a load, a hump. In any moment of quiet, when sheer fatigue prevented him from struggling, he was apt to feel this mysterious weight, this growth or collection of nameless things which it was the business of his life to carry about" (39). His "broad back" is "stooped with its own weight, its strength warped almost into deformity", whereas in his youth his "wide shoulders" were as yet "unwarped" (16, 17). His disfigurement extends itself into his apparel ("he liked to wear good clothes, but once he had put it on each article appeared to go its own way"); he sports a "deformed, transparent raincoat" (the transparency of which perhaps only *reveals* deformity), and his hat is "misshapen" (5/6, 59/60, 96). His physical surfaces are distorted by his spiritual crisis, which is inscribed there for all to see; "his troubles (...) were clearly written out upon his face" (14).

From the Gloriana's "dusky, splotched" interior emerges Tamkin, who possesses an apparent ease of access to Wilhelm's hopes and weaknesses, which he exploits with the "shrewdness almost cruel" at which his interrogative style hints (80). Wilhelm is skeptical towards "Doctor" Tamkin's qualifications to hold forth, as he is inclined to, on the "world of maladjustment" around him (99). Whether Tamkin is a "genius" or a trickster (specifically, a hypnotist), what is certain is that he plies his trade by means of *stories*; he is forever regaling Wilhelm with strange tales of eccentric families he has known (67, 82, 96). The world which Tamkin tries to sell to Wilhelm - one in which "everyone was like the faces on a playing card, upside down either way" - is predicated upon a ubiquity of "double-lifing" (to borrow Mintouchian's term from *Augie March*) in the everyday (63). But, as Wilhelm implies in his unspoken reaction to one of Tamkin's taller tales, the "doctor" is himself a doubler of lives in his relentless storytelling. Tamkin's reference to his dead wife, an alcoholic and suicide, provokes Wilhelm to think of his interlocutor as a purveyor of "nasty lies. He invented a woman and killed her off (...). He's a puffed-up little bogus" (95). Wilhelm also reacts against Tamkin's efforts to incorporate him into his version of the world, to characterize him as a

"type", as an example of "the neurotic character": "Damn it, Tamkin! (...) Cut that out. I don't like it. Leave my character out of consideration" (88). Although Wilhelm foolishly involves himself in Tamkin's business venture, he avoids absorption into Tamkin's overdetermining vision of life, which has the form, whatever truth there may be within it, of a fiction.

While Wilhelm's "character" retains its integrity in the face of Tamkin's "characterizing" schemae, its resources are sorely depleted by its engagement with Tamkin's belief in seizing the day, in catching the wave of the "eternal present, like a big, huge, giant wave colossal, bright and beautiful, full of life and death, climbing into the sky, standing in the seas" (89). In following Tamkin's advice, Wilhelm flies too near to the sun, emerging from the Gloriana's gloom in a doomed attempt to grasp "the hot spokes of the sun" which turn in the sky above Broadway; as the wheel of the day turns, he is caught in its annihilating revolution (101). He has been "burned", as Dr Adler puts it, left with "ashes in his mouth", while the "leaden spokes of sunlight" persist above him (109, 113, 115). Previously embarrassed by illumination, Wilhelm is finally ruined by it; but there remains within him an area inaccessible at the last to such oppressive scrutiny. The reader may approach, but never apprehend, this area, its lack of definition being all the more distinctive in the context of Wilhelm's chronic helplessness before the inspecting, defining eyes of narrator and reader. While Wilhelm appears to suffer from an excess of names - Wilhelm Adler, Tommy Wilhelm, Wilky, Velvel - the opacity within him, towards which the narrative gravitates, escapes the narrator's attempts to place a verbal fix upon it. Early in the novel, Wilhelm worries that he has "no reserve", in that he is unable to conceal his inner condition from those around him, and while the phrase punningly suggests a dearth of financial as well as charismatic resources on Wilhelm's part, *Seize the Day* takes its leave of its central character with a definite, if undefined, "reserve" intact (38).

At the novel's beginning, Wilhelm anticipates the imminent descent upon himself of "a huge trouble long presaged but till now formless", and, as noted earlier, his "peculiar burden" seems to be composed of "nameless things" (4, 39). The intimations of disfigurement threaded through the text suggest that Wilhelm, like Hymen Lustgarten as seen by Willis Mosby, lacks the potential to exist in

"suitable form", while the various mutations of his "name" imply a discomfort on his part with the very notion of nomenclature. Originally Wilhelm Adler, he becomes "Tommy" for the sake of his desired Hollywood career; for, as the talent-scout-cum-pimp Maurice Venice tells the young hero-to-be, "the world had named Wilhelm to shine before it" (23). But Wilhelm thinks of this "Tommy" as being someone other, someone he "had always had a great longing to be", while "Wilky", as Dr Adler continues to call him, remains "his inescapable self" (24/5). The improved version of himself having failed to materialize, Wilhelm is brought down by the gravitational pull of his *name*. The narrative accumulates a weight akin to that of the "sunlight", or of Wilhelm's "peculiar burden", as it proceeds, "naming" Wilhelm as the point on which its various emergent "forms" converge. This act of naming, which is itself a means of illumination, has something in it of the sadism which Tamkin sees in "counting any number"; the narrating voice acquires an edge of cruelty by virtue of its presumed full possession of the facts in Wilhelm's case, as in the novel's opening lines: "when it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought". The narrator cannot wait to put Wilhelm's "character" in its ironic place, to bring its failures and self-deceptions directly to the reader's attention; by the stage at which we read of how Wilhelm's troubles were "written out upon his face", the narrator's sly qualification ("so at least he thought") has doubled up into an incredulous jeer - "he wasn't even aware of it" (14). Although there is "a certain amount of evidence" to support Wilhelm's faith in his own stoicism, it is cited as a means of further undercutting his stature: "he had once been an actor - no, not quite, an extra" (3). The narrating voice checks itself, pauses, builds up to the demeaning qualification ("extra") which, although accurate and pertinent enough, is preceded by the word "actor" as if to connote that Wilhelm, surplus to requirements, a never-was rather than a has-been, is deserving of contempt.

As is common in Bellow's fictions, narratorial omniscience takes on a sinister aspect, and narrative form itself is viewed ambivalently, on account of its tendency to "characterize" the central character, to represent the three-dimensional as two-dimensional, to reduce reality to a congruence with its own vocabulary. The Bellowian narrator appears again as a demiurge, or as an avatar of such an untrustworthy creator, grounding the central character in a fallen, "deeply readable" zone which

appears to imitate, and body forth, the overdetermining qualities of its designer. As Kirby Allbee embodied an implicit critique of authorial iniquity in *The Victim*, so characters in *Seize the Day* appear to conspire with the narrator in the sacrifice of Wilhelm on the altar of their various "fictions". Dr Adler's contempt for Wilhelm, Tamkin's shrewd insight into Wilhelm's weaknesses, Margaret's excessive demands upon Wilhelm's reserves, and all other perspectives on Wilhelm must be mediated by the narrating voice; it might, if challenged, claim to share in their exploitative relations with their victim only insofar as it is obliged to depict them. But there is a cumulative sense that these characters are themselves representative of the narratorial function, that their sadism and meanness of spirit are specific components, or reflections, of the larger "nameless" weight beneath which Wilhelm struggles. It is as if the distaste for the central character which the narrator exhibits at the novel's beginning is rerouted through various ventriloquized agencies in the story itself. If Dr Braun's narratorial enterprise in "The Old System" was angelic in its attempt to return his "significant dead" to a sort of life, then the narrator of *Seize the Day* is involved in a markedly less exalted effort, apparently aiming to crush his character flat (into two dimensions), a project prevented from reaching its completion only by the obstruction presented to it by Wilhelm's unnameable, unilluminable descent "past words" at the novel's end.

That concluding descent reveals the narrator's vocabulary to be as oppressive and reificatory as any of those employed by the denizens of Wilhelm's New York; but before attending to the method by which this revelation is made, we should observe how that final scene functions as a punch-line to the novel's "Hollywood thread". Maurice Venice, expounding upon the nature of screen stardom to the young Wilhelm, claims that the star becomes "'a lover to the whole world'": "'one fellow smiles, a billion people also smile. One fellow cries, the other billion sob with him'" (22). According to Venice's theory, charisma magnetically attracts the sympathies of others to its bearer; he smiles and the world smiles with him, he cries and does not cry alone. Wilhelm's youthful charm having been proved to be largely ephemeral, his love "'for the whole world'" proves to be unrequited. A few days before that on which the action of the novel takes place, Wilhelm's passage through an "underground corridor" beneath Times Square, a tunnel "he had always hated and hated more than ever now", in

which "the haste, heat and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth", provokes an "onrush of loving kindness" (84/5). He is moved by a conviction that a "larger body" contains within it, as kin, himself and his fellow New Yorkers:

all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and sisters. He was imperfect and disfigured himself, but what difference did that make if he was united with them by this blaze of love? And as he walked he began to say 'Oh my brothers - my brothers and my sisters,' blessing them all as well as himself. (84/5)

Wilhelm suspects that such a sensation may be as meaningless as the occurrence of "a hard-on at random", but instead chooses to consider it as an intimation of "something very big. Truth, like" (85). The "truth" of the scene, unfortunately for the imminently penniless Wilhelm, may lie in the parallel it implicitly draws between his access of filial feeling, his consequent eagerness to "bless" those around him, which as an idea or as an action might be seen by his "brothers and sisters" as evidence of derangement, and the claims made on his attention by an "old man" with a "bandaged beggar face" who busks in the street, an "old press clipping on his fiddle case to prove he had once been a concert violinist" (99/100). This prophetic figure accosts Wilhelm twice - "'You!'" - and is twice refused, Wilhelm hurrying by "with worried eyes" on the first occasion, dismissing "the omen" of the beggar's pointing bow on the second (100, 105). His subway euphoria is thus indicative of his kinship with "the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined" (as *The Victim* has it) rather than of membership of the "larger body" of humanity.

Without the assistance of Hollywood's power to draw an audience into the sphere of the star's projected emotions, Wilhelm's "smile" falls on stony ground. His "loving kindness" is anomalous and irrelevant in an environment in which "hate", "haste", and "heat" (the alliteration revealing the narrative's greater interest in capturing a sense of claustrophobia) predominate. Similarly, the tears at the novel's end are his alone; only he, "of all the people in the chapel, was sobbing", Venice's vaunted "billions" having failed to share in his sorrow. His emotions are as unknown as his identity to those around him, who speculate about the latter rather than sympathize with the former. That he is nameless and, at last, invulnerable to the scrutiny of others, may hint at a saving grace, a cessation of pressure upon Wilhelm's overexposed self, a matter which we will turn to again in the next section

of this chapter. But considered within the context of the novel's "Hollywood thread", the scene is an ironic refutation of Venice's ideal of fame; Wilhelm finally finds an audience, draws a crowd, only on account of his inability to act, on the occasion of his final loss of social "reserve".

5.3 *Sinking in Poetry*

The set of terms which inform *Seize the Day*'s most important structure of metaphor are alluded to, but not included, in the text of the novel itself. The allusion occurs when Wilhelm recalls how, in order to entangle himself in the Hollywood thread, he threw in his studies at college, which included a course in English literature ("Literature 1"; inevitably, poetry is assigned its number, 13). His favourite line from "Lycidas" - "Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor" - bears directly upon his own figurative drowning to come, and Wilhelm consciously employs its terms when anticipating his destitution, the possibility that he will "finally sink beneath that watery floor", that "the waters of the earth are going to roll over me" (13, 56, 77). However, the significance of his "involuntary memory" of the conclusion of Shakespeare's seventy-third Sonnet - "love that well which thou must leave ere long" - requires rather more in the way of explication (12). Wilhelm thinks that the line surfaces in his thoughts as a moral imperative, which demands that "he should love that well", but the portion of the poem left unquoted includes the series of images which is disseminated throughout *Seize the Day* to such an extent that it becomes the dominant governing force shaping the novel's vocabulary, providing the most fully realized of the "deeply readable" contexts through which Wilhelm proceeds.

The Sonnet's first four lines, which remain submerged, perhaps lost, in Wilhelm's memory, contain the key:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.⁹

The brokerage office itself is the "bare ruined choir", in which the "sweet birds" have been supplanted by predatory, robotic imitations, which emit a different kind of song. The board displaying the all-important numbers, towards which all eyes are turned, is driven by mechanical

innards which "hummed and whirred like mechanical birds", the "flutter of the wheels within" sounding "like a huge cage of artificial birds" (105, 78, 81). It is this reified form of "song" which triggers Wilhelm's recollection of "the long phrases of the birds" in his Roxbury idyll. The scene also resembles a kind of vaudeville, a "narrow crowded theater (...) filled with the Broadway crowd", the focus of attention being the play of "tiny figures" on the board (78). The office manager observes their motions through a "pair of opera glasses" (59). As Wilhelm comes to realize his ruin, the board's "tumblers were speeding with the clack of drumsticks upon wooden blocks, more than ever resembling a Chinese theater"; his first efforts to track down Tamkin involve a glimpse behind the scenes where the "tubes" of the board's workings "glittered in the dark" (103, 105). Traces of the pastoral are present, but largely ignored, as when Rappaport, the curmudgeonly millionaire beside whom Wilhelm sits, neglects the intimation of beauty directly in front of his face, in the "long perfect ash" on the end of his cigar, "the white ghost of the *leaf* with all its veins and its fainter pungency. It was ignored, in its beauty, by the old man. For it was beautiful" (emphasis mine, 87). The board is seen also as sounding like "a swarm of electrical bees", these bees having been transplanted from Wilhelm's beloved garden into a New York in which humanity and its strivings are taking on the characteristics of insects, as when a helicopter carrying mail flies overhead "light as a locust", or when Wilhelm thinks to himself of how "people are dropping like flies" as a result of the prevalent death-wish (87, 99).

It seems that a pastoral elegy of sorts is submerged beneath, or in the process of emerging from under, the reifying theatre of "the world's business". The elegiac mood surfaces in the indirect form of puns which exhibit the latency of the bucolic in the midst of "hell itself". Central to the relationship between the seventy-third Sonnet and *Seize the Day* is the apparent absence in the latter of the "sweet birds" themselves. Their whereabouts is indicated, by means of a rather bathetic joke, in Wilhelm's encounter with Rappaport, "the Rockefeller of the chicken business", whose fortune derives from his involvement in what is seen by Wilhelm as the "sinister" process ("murder", he thinks) by which "millions of animals, little chickens" are imprisoned, bred, and slaughtered (85/6). Wilhelm's "queer feeling" about the poultry industry prompts a flight of fancy in which Rappaport

faces the prospect of a vengeful chicken judgment in the afterlife; "what if they all were waiting?" (86). He recalls driving past chicken farms resembling "prisons", and imagines, in apocalyptic terms, the by-products of these slaughterhouses as constituting a dead fowl's dump, as a lake of fire: "pile all the coops of the slaughtered on end, and in one week they'd go higher than Mount Everest or Mount Serenity. The blood filling the Gulf of Mexico. The chicken shit, acid, burning the earth" (85). These birds, "sweet" to the palate, are silenced, imprisoned, and consumed. Although Wilhelm's supposition of a "day of reckoning" for Rappaport implies a measure of sympathy for the farmer, Wilhelm's anxiety over the suffering of his victims reveals that he casts his lot with the chickens.

However, the "sweet birds" persist in the text in other, less literal, respects. Dr Adler asks himself why his son cannot "try to sweeten his appearance a little" (42). Wilhelm's "song", frustrated so intensively for so long, makes a late resurgence when its bearer refuses Tamkin's attempts to characterize him as a "type", and "an angry and yet weak sweetness rose" in his throat (89). Troubled as he is by an awareness of his physical ungainliness, by his likeness to a "hippopotamus", Wilhelm, it is intimated, is an avatar of Shakespeare's "birds"; he wears a "dove-gray" shirt, and his walk, the screen test reveals, is pigeon-toed (his "toes turned inward, as though his shoes were an impediment", 6, 23). Tamkin, also, is "pigeon-toed", but his resemblance to "a rare, peculiar bird" is rather more troubling (62, 82). With his "gull's nose" and "clawlike" nails, he appears to be something of a bird of carrion, a vulture perhaps, given "his naked, shining head" and his "red hanging underlip" with its suggestion of carnivorous salivation (62, 73). Before the force of his hypnotic power, as concentrated in the gaze of "his deadly brown, heavy, impenetrable eyes", Wilhelm is as helpless as a chicken before a line drawn in the dirt (62, 73, 82). This predator, staring into the "gray eyes" of its prey, seduces it with talk of how, in order to triumph according to the terms of the world's business, one must "'feel the process, the money-flow, the whole complex. To know how it feels to be a seaweed you have to get in the water'" (109, 61). But Wilhelm descends beneath the surface of the world's business not as an amphibian, but as a flightless bird; his final coherent thoughts as the spirit of (chicken) revenge rises within him are of his girlfriend Olive whose

infrequent appearances in his thoughts only hint at her importance in the novel's metaphoric scheme (she is, like Iva and Mary before her, a suppressed, partially occluded centre for the text). In his desperation, he imagines his impending self-abasement before her, and resolves to go beyond it: "I'll try to start again with Olive. In fact, I must. Olive loves me. Olive - " (115).

As his train of thought is broken by what he takes to be a glimpse of the fleeing Tamkin, the "olive branch" extended towards Wilhelm the dove, in the form of Olive's attendances of love, is spurned, and Wilhelm the chicken plunges towards its doom. This particular system of metaphor, driven towards its cruel and ingenious completion with the juxtaposition of "Olive" with the disrupting "-", is so "deeply readable", so bathetic in its overdetermining design, that it embarrasses the reading which attends to it. That is its rationale; the reader is made to share in its work of (sadistic) wit and (lack of) feeling. The reader is implicated in the conspiracy to "characterize" the character on which *Seize the Day* centres its reductive, reifying structures, to "name" it as not only "Wilhelm" but also as "dove" or "chicken". Returning to H. Porter Abbott's description of the Bellovian character, that is, one conceived of "as a nexus of passion, enigma, freedom and form", we may note how the cumulative metaphors surrounding Wilhelm attempt (albeit with a measure of assistance from their victim) to impose a "form" upon him, scrutinize all the facets of his failure so that his "enigma" is elided, and enclose his "passion" and "freedom" within a "larger body" of irony.¹⁰ But the attempt fails, as these reifying structures are obstructed in their ambitions, are prevented from attaining congruence with the structure of *Seize the Day* itself. For that virulent strain of bathetic metaphor, once apprehended, must be dismissed, as being too reductive, too vulgar in its deployment of Shakespeare's elegiac vocabulary in pursuit of such limited ends, to be countenanced. The effect of this is that "Wilhelm" - beyond this point, "deep reading" cannot pass, and the character is loosened from its confining "name" - is preserved, at the last, from the depredations visited upon him by narrator, reader and fellow characters. His "readable" aspect, that which renders him vulnerable before the satirizing agency of the text, is excised from the narrative as if it were so much dead matter.

The narrating voice can depict, but is apparently unable or unwilling to explicate Wilhelm's emotional overflow by the stranger's coffin. It seems to join with Wilhelm in his "great stifling sorrow, almost admiration" before the "meditative look" on the face of the dead man, who has "sunk into the final thought" (117). The ironic mode foregone, the description of the corpse's appearance is given almost apologetically, the narration seemingly aware of the way in which its perspicacious visual sense can callously exploit its object: "on the surface, the dead man with his formal shirt and his tie and silk lapels and his powdered skin looked so proper; only a little beneath so - black, Wilhelm thought, so fallen in the eyes" (117). The narrating eye shares with Wilhelm in the chastening act of perception, of looking beneath the "surface". Descriptions of Wilhelm's impressions still permeate the surface of the text, but he is increasingly distant from these representations, beyond their reach; on whose behalf, the conclusion of *Seize the Day* asks, are these representations made? Wilhelm's access of emotion can be attributed initially to "sentiment", but then a "deeper feeling", less easily named if nameable at all, takes hold (117). As he moves past "coherence", the narrative can follow him only so far, occupying his first-person voice even as his thoughts, ridden with ellipses and disjunctures, vacate the verbal sphere: "what'll I do? I'm stripped and kicked out ... Oh, Father, what do I ask of you? What'll I do about the kids - Tommy, Paul? My children. And Olive?" (117). There is no purchase for Wilhelm to hold on to in this final flurry of "names", as, "soon", "the source of all tears had suddenly sprung open within him", and he now cries "with all his heart" (117, 118). The narrator retreats from this final dissolution; the intensity of its emotion embarrasses the vocabulary, itself demeaned by its manipulation towards ironizing and sadistic ends, which would claim the ability to represent it. The narrator stands, like the "bystander" which he is revealed to be, with the dry-eyed remainder of the funeral retinue, who evaluate the scene Wilhelm is making as a piece of theatre: "oh my, oh my! To be mourned like that!" (118).

Wilhelm's escape from narratorial inquisition is complete, having "hidden himself" from overdetermining illumination "by the great and happy oblivion of tears"; he "sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries towards the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (118). A definition of that "heart's ultimate need", or of "the source of all tears", is not forthcoming. It is,

fittingly, impossible to *determine* whether the "consummation" imminent at the novel's end (or perhaps simultaneous *with* the novel's end) is devoutly to be wished or dreaded. Wilhelm's weeping is "torn" from him as were, one page previously, the names of those to whom he has been bound by familial and emotional ties; the implication may be that Wilhelm, "past reason", is tearing at himself, that his escape from the sphere of the narrator's defining, deathly awareness has necessitated his collapse, unable to resist the gravitational pull of his "heart's ultimate need". Or it may be that his immersion in "music", as prophesied by the beggar violinist's pointing bow, constitutes an affirmation of "song", of a nonverbal world elsewhere, to be interpreted as a liberation by virtue of its resistance to interpretation itself. And while this reading tends towards a conclusion such as the latter, given the demonic aspect it has observed in *Seize the Day's* structuring of narrative, the ambiguity of Wilhelm's fate cannot be commuted. Although the narrative's objective might appear to be the sacrifice of his "character" on the altar of the "deeply readable", the possibility persists that, without the "deeply readable", that "character" is nothing.

* * *

Seize the Day caps and counters the exponential optimism of *Augie March*, the demiurge witnessed at work in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* returning to inhabit its host narrative with new virulence. Tamkin, the scenarist keen to exploit his insight into his audience's weaknesses, grounds the text's overdetermining agencies in a manner similar to Allbee. The difference is that Tamkin is in the ascendant, unassailable, beyond his victim's reach. *Seize the Day* allows Tamkin his flamboyant villainy, and condemns Wilhelm to failure from its very beginning, because the novel's central concern is its own *elegaic potential*. Its approach towards epiphany recalls the conclusion of *Dangling Man*, in which the narrative attempts and fails to move beyond the limits which it has set for itself, the currency of the epiphanic having been devalued. by Joseph's immersion in Joycean pastiche. *Seize the Day* succeeds, however, because it guards that elegaic potential jealously against the depredations of the "deeply readable" agencies at work in the text, and, in the conclusion, restricts the narrator's access to the story which it tells.

6. On *Henderson the Rain King*

Henderson the Rain King's publication in 1959 was preceded, as noted at this thesis's beginning, by the condemnation of "deep reading" which openly attacked that interpretational practice against which Bellow's fiction implicitly argues. Both the novel and the essay exhibit an impatience with the kind of reading which *Seize the Day* drew upon itself in order to expose that reading's evasions and blindnesses. *Seize the Day* invited the attention of the "deep reader" only to shame it, embarrass it by the comparison of its bathetic end-product with the pathos reclaimed for Tommy Wilhelm at the novel's end. The underlying principle of that novel's bathetic scheme – that is, the elision of Wilhelm's potential as a "character" by the systematic infractions made on it by metaphors figuring him as an animal of one type or another – is taken up again in *Henderson*, but on this occasion its presence is rather more above board, and within the scope of the central character's apprehension. The mode of consciousness evident in the workings of the narrating intelligence in *Seize the Day* becomes in *Henderson* an object of consciousness addressed within the story itself. The text, in the earlier novel, is rendered as a host body for the "deeply readable", a repository for the bad faith and cruelty which are present as latent potentials in the making of fiction itself; as Wilhelm disappears from view on the far side of the narrative, the reader disengages, or perhaps recoils, from its workings. There rises, from the body of *Seize the Day*, an apparition of the novelistic intelligence not in the form of a disinterested Flaubertian surgeon but in the shape of a vivisector, the bad physician whose operations resemble acts of torture. *Henderson* distances itself from this spectre by placing its central character as its narrator, and by then placing at the centre of his concerns his physical mortality – "the body of this death".¹ Eugene Henderson is in part his own physician, for bad or good, and in this his position resembles that of Joseph, whose vanities led him to feed upon his prostrate self. But *Henderson*, considered as a house of fiction, is neither a cannibal hut nor a torture chamber, but instead stands as a more humane, more comic, institution; a "theatre" in both the surgical and dramatic senses of the word.

Eugene Henderson is "a millionaire several times over, six feet four in height, weighing two hundred and thirty pounds, socially prominent, and a combat officer holding the Purple Heart and other decorations", to cite the most straightforward of the various descriptions which he offers of himself (89). At the age of fifty-five, Henderson makes an impromptu trip to Africa, ostensibly taking leave of his inheritances and his history; of "my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul!" (3). As the novel begins, he is making a conscious, and concerted, return to these matters; he relates his story as if providing an account of himself to a specific audience, a committee before which he is debriefing himself, his adventure at an end. His avowed objective is "to make sense to you people", to present his tale according to the proper "order of business", as "an explanation is necessary, for living proof of something of the highest importance has been presented to me so I am obliged to communicate it" (3, 4, 22). Despite the formality of the occasion and the gravity of his undertaking, Henderson is a very tactile storyteller, who sets his greatest store by a tone of confessional intimacy punctuated by buttonholing lunges at his readers' lapels, as exemplified in the near-deranged urgency of his catalogue of cares as quoted above. Henderson allows its hero his almost chronic condition of over-excitement, and does not, contrary to the judgments made on it by many sober critics, suffer as a result.

Criticism of the novel tends to comment unfavourably on what is seen, often, as a lack of opposition to, or context for, the euphoric productions of Henderson's subjectivity. He is read as being a "deep reader" himself, lost, for the most part, in solipsistic excavation of "meaning" from what Ralph Freedman calls "an illusory environment".² Henderson's "excursion into atemporal realities, divorced from human time and material society", as Judie Newman puts it, exposes as deceptive the projections of his imagination, reveals the fraudulence of his tendency to see his environment as illustrative of his inner state.³ Jonathan Baumbach observes Henderson as attaining possession, at the novel's end, of a "somewhat illusory" self, his consequent "ecstatic self-affirmation" being "possible only where there is no real world about to deny it".⁴ According to such an argument, Henderson is indulged by *Henderson*, given too free a reign with his fantasies; the wise reader, it

seems, would do well to look down on the enthusiasm displayed by the oafish Eugene, and regret that he was not taught a more suitable lesson during his adventure. Michael Allen remarks that Bellow's hero, endowed with such a "precariously poised 'uncultured' vitality", is transparently ill at ease with the intellectual discourse in which his author deals.⁵ Dissenting from such supercilious readings of the novel and its central character are views such as that expressed by Daniel Hughes, for whom Henderson "proves his own ironist", moving from "a version of reality that is parodic and farcical" to "a vision of parody overcome", in pursuit of "a reality" which "can be shown conclusively to be something other than himself".⁶ Jonathan Wilson, in opposition to the view of the novel as being in thrall to the "illusory", cites Henderson as being the "most 'there'" of Bellow's heroes.⁷

The reading of *Henderson* which follows finds itself in greater sympathy with the opinions of Hughes and Wilson than with those of Baumbach and Allen, and must offer a nod to Robert F. Kiernan, for his observation that Bellow, "vastly amused by myths and rituals that reduce the world to coherence", offers in *Henderson* "an alternate vision that readily embraces the inconsistent and irreconcilable. (...) The inconsistency and inconclusiveness that are often thought a failing of *Henderson the Rain King* are Bellow's narrative postulate".⁸ In place of *Seize the Day's* ambiguous aspirations towards "coherence" around its central character, *Henderson* exhibits a desire to reveal the essentially provisional nature of such "coherences" (Robert Shulman classes it, along with *Augie March* and *Herzog*, as being an "open form" novel, governed by the "sense that process is more important than conclusion").⁹ To this reading, both Henderson and *Henderson* succeed in their attempts to "make sense".

6.1 Inheritances

Henderson's monologue begins with a series of apparent false starts, tentative and frustrated attempts to site himself within a coherent narrative. His difficulties in this can be seen as constituting a variation on the "exquisite problem" faced by Henry James's artist, dealing in "relations" which in truth "stop nowhere", who must "draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so".¹⁰ As Henderson finds himself wandering from the specific course posed in

the novel's opening line – "what made me take this trip to Africa?" – he selects and discards alternative points of departure: that offered by memories of his father, "a well-known man" who "had a beard and played the violin" (Henderson himself practises on the same instrument and, during his voyage, acquires a beard), and that offered by reference to his "ancestors", who "stole land from the Indians", their mendacity ensuring that their descendant "became heir to a great estate" (21). Henderson's problem is not of the "exquisite" sort enjoyed by the rarefied Jamesian artist who, like Dr. Braun, may embark at his leisure upon his narratorial enterprise, because Henderson is *driven*, as if under a charismatic spell, seized both by the "living proof" with which he has been entrusted and by the presence, notional or otherwise, of the audience before which he makes his deposition; as he admits, "to be the center of attention in a crowd always stirs and disturbs me" (171). His attempts to begin that deposition prove unsatisfactory because they mire him in the various inheritances, such as those bequeathed to him by his father ("no, not that") and by his ancestors ("no, that won't do either"), which held him in their sway before his expedition, during which the burden of his inheritances was displaced by a charge of enlightening power, which liberated him from constriction within the "geometries" drawn around him by his inheritances.

The immediate impetus for his travels is the death of Miss Lenox, the "queer, wacky little spinster" employed to make Henderson his breakfast while he sojourns, between his marriages to Frances and Lily, in the country (26, 39). "This old creature" is a peripheral figure until her demise, for which Henderson draws the blame upon himself. After an argument one morning with his new wife Lily, "sore and yelling at the breakfast table, hammering with my fist until the coffee pot turned over", Henderson finds his aged neighbour lying dead on her kitchen floor: "during my rage, her heart had stopped" (38, 39). Although he avoids what he imagines to be an accusing stare from one of Miss Lenox's cats – "how could I be blamed – because my voice was loud, and my anger was so great?" – he concludes that "the old lady had fallen under my violence as people keel over during heat waves or while climbing the subway stairs", identifying the "violence" exhibited and threatened by his behaviour with the ineluctable forces of nature and chance, a curse which he must, "for the sake of all", carry away from his domestic American milieu (39, 40). Her death is fastened upon by

Henderson, incorporated into his conception of the world as a system of cause and effect in which his "violence" is a malign and central influence. And her dead body is found to be a readable artefact, the conclusive statement of a truth which the environment has, it seems, been trying to bring to Henderson's attention: "all this while, these days and weeks, the wintry garden had been speaking to me of this fact and no other; and till this moment I had not understood what this gray and white and brown, the bark, the snow, the twigs, had been telling me", that is, that "the last little room of dirt is waiting. Without windows. So for God's sake make a move, Henderson, put forth effort" (39, 40).

Henderson's dissatisfaction with the life which he has inherited is compounded by his eagerness for signs and wonders, his insistence that his is a world replete with coded meanings which await his attention. The world *speaks* to him, through agencies such as that which he encounters in an aquarium in France, in the form of an octopus which seems to return his gaze: "the eyes spoke to me coldly. But even more speaking, even more cold, was the soft head with its speckles, and the Brownian motion in those speckles, a cosmic coldness in which I felt I was dying" (19). The intimation he intuitively – once again, of death, of his imminent "last day" – attributes an eloquence to the animal (as previously to the inanimate), an attribution which is not mistaken in principle. Henderson assumes that his world is of the pan-deterministic variety, as constructed by Bellow, in ironic mode, in his previous novels. Henderson's apparent naiveté, as shown by his readiness to place his tantrum as the cause of Miss Lenox's death, derives in part from his tendency to "read deeply" into his environment, and in part from his desire to transcend the ironies which beset him, claiming him as their inheritor, at every turn (he comes "from a stock that has been damned and derided for more than a hundred years", 86). Bellow equips his hero with a hunger for revealed truth which, paradoxically, drives that hero further into the ironic mode even as he seeks to escape it.

One consequence of this is that the area of ironic operations which Bellow reserves for himself in *Henderson* is very much smaller than those employed in earlier novels (with the possible exception of *Augie March*). In *Dangling Man* and *Seize the Day*, intimations of meanings accessible to the reader but beyond the reach of the central character's apprehension tend to punish, characterize, and

convict, to place the character within an ironic category. In *Henderson*, in which the central character aspires to be "his own ironist", such instances of authorial intervention tend to support, rather than subvert, the qualities of that character's consciousness: Henderson negotiates a recognizably Bellovian ironic zone, but one which offers up proofs, rather than refutations, of his ideas and beliefs. While his environment is to some extent a product of his own mental projections, and is also a satiric distortion of these projections, his version of the world and his evaluation of that version conform to the novel's notion of truth. Unlike Joseph and Tommy Wilhelm, he remains in occupancy of the novel's centre, spared the displacement effected in the earlier novels through ventriloquial assertions of a higher authorial power at work in the text.

It is not that Henderson clings tenaciously to his first-person voice; in fact, in the earlier stages of his story, it seems that the first-person voice is clinging tenaciously to *him*, a burden which he might wish to discard but finds himself unable to do so. There is "a ceaseless voice in my heart" which possesses him through its repetition of "*I want, I want, I want*", and "there have been times when it hardly ever let me alone" (12, 233). Pressured from within by subjectivity and desire, he finds himself repeatedly to be obliged, by external forces also, to offer an account of himself. Through his trip to Africa he hopes to "leave certain things behind", to "get clean away", to travel beyond the reach of English ("the great imperial language of today"), and consequently to succeed in having "left the world" (45, 46, 53). But his native language has preceded him, and Prince Itelo of the Arnewi, the first of two tribes encountered by Henderson, speaks it fluently; Henderson is asked "to tell about myself" through his royal interpreter before Willatale, the tribe's queen, and finds himself inexplicably "oppressed", unable to "know where to begin" (76, 77). Despite his acknowledged weakness for playing to the crowd, Henderson is not his own preferred choice of subject matter. But, try as he might to elude his essential Henderson-ness, it is returned to his attention time and time again. As he journeys further into Africa, he regales his guide Romilayu with "the story of my life, to see whether this strange background (...) would take off some of the curse, but I came out still more exotic and fantastic always than any ants, ostriches, mountains" (114). He remains slightly aghast at the wealth of the exceptional and extraordinary within him, at the tenacity with which the

first person clings to him. And the domain of the English language is similarly inescapable; the limit of his travels is set with his arrival at the court of King Dahfu of the Wariri, who thrives on Henderson's reluctant introspection and recommends involvement in a rigorous course of analysis, which demands the ingestion of numerous indigestible set texts, "literature", in English, of course, made of words "thick and heavy as tomb-stones" (243).

Henderson becomes Dahfu's patient and protégé, the centre of the king's pedagogical attentions, an essentially passive object of study, but in his encounter with the Arnewi, Henderson styles himself as the hero come to rescue the tribe, through decisive action, from the effects of a drought which threatens to starve it and its beloved cattle, which are "like brothers and sisters, like children" to the Arnewi (56). He resolves to cleanse the tribe's cistern of its infestation of frogs (which renders the water unfit for human or bovine consumption) by means of an improvised bomb. Inspired in this project by an epiphanic "go-ahead sign" from "the object-world itself", in the form of a refulgent morning light redolent of "some powerful magnificence not human", an experience "exactly the opposite" of that "with the octopus in the tank", Henderson sets out for the cistern, bomb in hand, before an audience of villagers who "knew this was a big event and were turning out in numbers, chattering or clapping their hands and singing out" (100, 102, 105/6). He appreciates their unwillingness to approach the cistern with him, as "in a crisis a man must be prepared to stand alone" (107). He feels that his anticipated success will surprise "life", which "may think it has got me written off in its records", which he perceives as having classified him, as a finished product, according to its own taxonomy; "Henderson: type so-and-so, with the auk and the platypus and other experiments illustrating such-and-such a principle, and laid aside" (105). While engaged in flight from the strictures placed upon him by the curse of his subjectivity and its clutter of inheritances, which cloister him with a "soul (...) like a pawn shop", "filled with unredeemed pleasures, old clarinets, and cameras, and moth-eaten fur", he still pursues redemption from the illustrative condition, which categorizes him in the third person ("Henderson") as a specimen of comic exotic (81). It is an attempt, in the heroic mode, to claim for himself the potential of *character*.

The attempt misfires, substituting for Henderson's expected apotheosis a supremely *illustrative* disaster. The bomb blows a hole in the cistern wall, and the water drains into the earth, the "curse" of the frogs driven out and replaced by the curse of Henderson, who finds himself still confined within "the same old story", not "fit to meet human kind", in "character" as devised for him by "life" (59, 111, 49). He is humbled still further by his arrival in the territory of the Wariri, a sophisticated people in no need of Henderson's assistance in the alleviation of the drought; the Buram, the official who interviews the newcomer Henderson, employing Romilayu as interpreter, "declared positively that the Wariri were going to have a ceremony very soon and make all the rain they needed" (131/2). Indeed, the Wariri magic is so very nearly a sufficient means of self-preservation that it requires Henderson's services only as its dupe. Henderson is the only man present at the ceremony who is both able *and willing* to lift and carry, as the ritual demands, the weighty wooden idol of "Mummah the goddess of clouds" (182). This achievement stirs him to imagine that he has got "into my depth. That real depth. I mean that depth where I have always belonged", that same "certain depth" which he felt to be within his reach when confident of success in ridding the cistern of its frogs (193, 105). But his joy in attainment of "life anew", his relief from the "violent feelings" which "seemed to have passed off or to have been transformed", are possible only because of his ignorance of his action's implications. At ease with himself at last, he has become the centre of the Wariri officialdom's attentions: "these people had turned on me all the darkness, all the expectancy, all the wildness, all the power, of their eyes" (195). He is now the "rain king", the "Sungu", not only a charismatic figure with a place "in the bosom of the people" but also a passive object of political intrigue (197).

This intrigue centres upon a conspiracy against the king, at its centre the Bunam, motivated by mistrust of Dahfu's apparent negligence of his royal duties. Driven by his enthusiasm into the unexpected role of the rain king, thus becoming heir to a new set of obligations, Henderson, within the circles of the court, joins with Dahfu in the latter's studies of, and efforts made at, "the transformation of human material" (236). Henderson observed how the king's own "enthusiasms and visions swept him far out", the plural "enthusiasms" being suggestive of a difference between our

narrator and his mentor, in that while Henderson is propelled beyond propriety by the forward force of that inner voice ("*I want, I want*"), as if shot helplessly forth from a point of singularity, Dahfu, the man of "ideas", loses "his head" on account of his involvement with his own "visions", because of the magnetic power exerted over him by intellectual pursuits, which distract him, even as they delight him, from the seriousness of the political machinations which undermine his position (235).

Dahfu suffers a fatal dispersal into the objects of his fascination, a variation on the experience of Joseph in *Dangling Man*. It is a prospect which threatens Henderson himself, but the lineaments of his self, and his physical health, are preserved, despite his fears. With Dahfu, he confronts these terrors in the alarmingly immediate form of Atti, the lioness which the king keeps beneath his palace, which Henderson is obliged to embrace both physically and metaphorically, in order "to feel something of what it is to be a lion" (275). Henderson habitually agonizes over his affinity with the pigs he keeps on his farm, animals which he suspects "had actually become a part of me", and believes that he carries with him "the prophecy of Daniel which I had never been able to shake off – 'They shall drive you from among men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field'" (21, 89). Already "fatally embroiled with animals", Henderson the "pig man" finds himself unable to "act the lion" as required, the pig-metaphor reasserting its power: "I felt my jowls, my snout; I did not dare look down at what had happened to me. Hams. Tripes, a whole caldron full of them. Trunk, a fat cylinder. It seemed to me that I couldn't even breathe without grunting" (21, 265, 270). Henderson stands as an apparent living disproof of Dahfu's theory of a physically plastic humanity, according to which "man (...) the prince of organisms" is "the master of adaptations", is "he himself (...) his principal work of art, in the body, working in the flesh" (237). Henderson seems to be *mastered* by such an "adaptation", the mutability of his form being more clownish than princely. His sufferings constitute a comic refutation of Dahfu's theory, while Dahfu's demise fixes a tragic limit beyond which his beloved "adaptations" cannot reach.

Once Dahfu's attention is drawn by Henderson, who has his unsatisfactory history "written all over" him, whom the king sees as a "treasure of illustrations", the Bunam's conspiracy proceeds apace

(211, 217). Dahfu's unpopularity stems from his improper relationship with the "forbidden and illicit" Atti, which distracts him from the predicament of Gmilo, the lion into which his dead father's spirit passed, who must be rescued by his son from the bush, in which the "father-lion" resides in the company of other lions, "mischief-makers and evildoers" all (230, 231). When Dahfu finally sallies forth in pursuit of Gmilo, and the status of "absolute master" conferred by his capture, the unreliability of his tools – tools which, Henderson subsequently concludes, have been sabotaged – causes him to fall to his death under the claws of a lion other than the elusive Gmilo (270). Dahfu's underestimation of the threat posed to him by the "mischief-makers and evildoers" at work in the Wariri court precipitates his death; that the Bunam and his faction are "living in the old universe" of superstition and magic does not inhibit their ability to bring down their more sophisticated ruler (292). Henderson has his own superstitious method of accounting for Dahfu's fall; the king is another victim of Henderson the "jinx", around whose "contagious" person hangs "death" (311). But with his dying words, Dahfu informs Henderson that "it's the other way around", that with the death of a king with "no child of age", the succession falls to the current bearer of the title of rain king (311, 312). Henderson arrives at the threshold of yet another "adaptation" necessitated by the overdetermining power of inheritance.

However, Dahfu has bequeathed Henderson the ability to escape the play of metaphor which threatened to imprison him within its range. Henderson worries that, within the King's elaborate typology, he is fit only for inclusion with "the bad types", but is assured by Dahfu, at the scene of his imminent demise, that Henderson's peculiarity as "a compound" exempts him from such classification (and thus from *categorization*, from *conviction*): "Maybe a large amount of agony. Maybe a small touch of the Lazarus. But I cannot fully subsume you. No rubric will fully hold you" (300). Before Atti, Henderson finds himself unable to bear "the richness of the mixture", his overwhelming experience of the lion's presence mingled with his helplessness before his own emotions. Dahfu's valediction, although it places him as "a compound", fashioned from basely classifiable component materials, attends to the "richness" of Henderson the "mixture", allows his character the dignity of the unique. It lights the touchpaper of the narrative's conclusion, authorizing

Henderson's exit from his self-imposed exile in the satiric domain. He is inspired to break from his previously chronic condition, "the repetition of a man's bad self", "the worst suffering that's ever been known"(329).

Having made his escape from the Wariri village, Henderson begins his return to North America, and thus also to a life which accepts the given of the English language (a coming to terms which results in, and is enacted through, his narration). His realization that his native tongue need not be borne as a weight arises from his newfound ability to take his leave of the compulsive inner mantra – "I want, I want" – that drove him on, and allow that verb to be governed by subjects other than himself: "I had a voice that said, I want! *I want?* It should have told me *she* wants, *he* wants, *they* want" (286). The "bad self's" eternal return is obstructed by Henderson's vacation of that central persona, the *first person*. The substitution of the noun reveals the "I" as a "compound" in itself, made up not merely of things *possessed* and simultaneously *possessing* – "my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals", and so on – but also of other subjectivities – "she", "he", "they". The cumulative pressure of the accretions which take Henderson's first person as their host body is dispelled; his adaptation into the role of rain king – his name suffixed by Dahfu with his new Wariri title into the *compound* "Henderson-Sungu" – is its *ne plus ultra*. This notion of the "compound" recurs in Henderson's preoccupation with reincarnation. Never one to believe that "the dead are utterly dead", he carries with him on the journey back the lion cub designated, expediently, by the Bunam as the repository of Dahfu's soul (30). Henderson takes this supposed metempsychosis to heart, naming the cub after his dead mentor and asserting that "this is Dahfu to me" (328). And on a plane bound for New York, he observes the "new luster" in the eyes of a young boy mixed with an "ancient power": "you could never convince me that *this was for the first time*" (330). Where Dahfu strives hubristically to master "adaptation", Henderson prefers a reconciliation with its workings. His adoption of the cub is the resolution of the novel's Nebuchadnezzar thread, of Henderson's anxiety concerning his helplessness before the "master-image" of the pig (270). It transpires that, change being "ordained", it need not be set invariably upon the reification of its subjects as finished products

(270). The soul's transmigration itself, whether it be into pig or lion cub, implies a reprieve from the dreaded "suitable form".

"Eugene Henderson" is himself a reincarnation of, for instance, "Augie March", whose pursuit of that "reality" garnered from giving an "account" of oneself neglected the tendency of such a "reality" to "account" for its author by enclosing him within its potentially inadequate set of terms. Like Augie, Henderson is in flight from fixity, although where Augie flees a principle (that is, *influence*), Henderson seeks to escape a specific prophecy which threatens to fix him in a form "not entirely fit for human companionship" (230). As "a pig man" ruling over "a pig kingdom" on his farm, he reincarnates "Tommy Wilhelm", the character consigned to a flightless bird's death by drowning (although we are never sure if that particular injustice is finally done, 21, 20). At the novel's end, Henderson emerges on the other side of the metaphor in which he imagined himself to be trapped, that metaphor being in truth one of the "various exaggerations and deformities of sensation" of which Henderson reads in Dahfu's textbooks, distortions by which "a fellow with a normal leg might be convinced that he had the leg of an elephant" (246). Henderson, declaiming his "basic loyalty" to "real life", is asked by Dahfu to consider "what shape and form" his desired reality takes; Dahfu's question is also a kind of threat, a threat made, albeit indirectly, to Bellow's previous central characters as well, made by the narratives which attempt to foreclose upon "character" itself (232/3). Dahfu, the advocate of, and aspirant towards, "suitable form", is rewarded for his endeavours with death; Henderson, insistent upon *reincarnating* Dahfu in the form of the lion cub, denies the "suitability" of any one "shape", and asserts the provisional nature of such repositories (be they prisons or refuges) for the soul.

As Henderson takes his leave of the "pig kingdom" in which he has placed himself, realizing that "I am not what I thought", the "master-image" recedes to reveal another correspondence on Henderson's part with the animal domain, one which ennobles rather than debases. He remembers the time in his youth spent working in an Ontario fairground, where one of his duties was to ride a roller coaster, for the edification of the paying public, with Smolak the bear, a "poor broken ruined

creature" from which he "received a deep impression" before "pigs ever came on my horizon": "I didn't come to the pigs as a tabula rasa. (...) Something deep already was inscribed on me" (338, 339). While "the pigs" are an overdetermining type, a parodic paradigm of undifferentiated creatureliness and therefore subversive of Henderson's claims to *character*, Smolak, named after the trainer who abandoned it, has its characterful portrait "incribed" by a Henderson who feels that his *own* character in part "inscribed" by *it*. "Two humorists before the crowd", Henderson and Smolak appear at the novel's end "by a common bond of despair (...) embraced", their mutual "despair" redeeming the Nebuchadnezzar thread (338). Through reminiscence, Henderson succeeds in retrieving his story's true beginning, intimated when the younger Henderson remarks that the bear and himself are "'two of a kind'": "Smolak was cast off and I am an Ishmael, too" (338). The assumption of the name implies that Henderson is not an Ahab, to be borne down by his "master-image". The reference to the most renowned buttonholing of reader by narrator in all of American literature rounds out the rhetorical aspect of Henderson's deposition, an allusion which constitutes a last-minute revision of the narrative's geometry, Henderson salvaging from obscurity his true point of origin.

Beyond this point, metaphors figuring Henderson as in some respect "animal" persist, but now *animate* – or, perhaps, are *animated by* – their host rather than diminish him. His plane having landed in Newfoundland for refuelling, Henderson descends to a "frozen ground of almost eternal winter" ("frozen", yet devoid of the threat he saw encoded in his own "wintry garden" at his adventure's beginning) to perform a kind of celebratory dance around the stationary machine, "galloped" in laps (in echo of his fairground quarters "in the stables", 340, 337). His circuits of the plane also place him as a variety of *bird* (with the power of flight so sorely lacking in Tommy Wilhelm). Previously, such likenesses exerted a reductive power, but they now appear to be in the service of, rather than opposed to, Henderson's potential as a "character". Their persistence is forewarned in an episode recounted in his narrative's fitful beginning, in which Henderson, a soldier in World War Two on duty near Salerno, reports a case of "the crabs" and is summarily stripped and disinfected "right at the crossroads, in the open" (22). Four medics shave "every hair from my body",

while "trucks filled with troops were passing, and fishermen and paisanos and kids and girls and women were looking on":

The GIs were cheering and laughing and the paisans laughed, the whole coast laughed, and even I was laughing as I tried to kill all four. They ran away and left me bald and shivering, ugly, naked, prickling between the legs and under the arms, raging, laughing, and swearing revenge. These are things a man never forgets and afterward truly values. (22) .

However, "the crabs found refuge in a crevice", necessitating further "dealings" with "these cunning animals" (22). Thus, we see Henderson before an audience so huge as to exceed his horizon ("the whole coast"), and *exposed* to the view of all as a bare, forked animal which is in fact not *wholly* denuded; the tenacity of the "cunning animals" merits its footnote and its implicit reiteration at the novel's end. This passage also offers, in advance, a riposte to Dahfu's project with Atti, "'to come to grips with this animal'", as Henderson puts it (295). The "grip" with the "animal" in which Henderson is involved is not within his control, as "the crabs" imply and as his roller coaster ride with Smolak, during which "we hugged each other, the bear and I", "I enbeared by him, and he probably humanized by me", demonstrate (339, 338). Recognition of this lets Henderson, "his own ironist", in on his own joke, sharing in it as when he joined his Salerno audience in laughter.

For Jonathan Baumbach, Henderson's "new-found land is desolate", his new-found self "somewhat illusory", his "ecstatic self-affirmation (...) possible only where there is no real world about to deny it"; Henderson fails to return from his exploration of what Andrew Waterman terms "an inner continent of the spirit".¹¹ Baumbach, I think, observes something happening in the novel's conclusion but mistakes it for something else; the scene in which Henderson performs his dance is *literally* "desolate" precisely in order to counter his earlier apprehension, as a *metaphor*, of his "wintry garden". The "illusory" aspect of his apparent rejuvenation is only to be expected; the novel asks us merely to concede that *this* Henderson, at *this* moment, is *less* "illusory" than those who have passed before. And the "real world" is "about" Henderson as a *potential*; if he has yet to make his return to it, then it is because that return is enacted not through his climactic dance but through the deposition which constitutes his narrative (although the dance itself – "leaping, leaping, pounding, and tingling" – reasserts that Henderson is not free of the force of gravity, that a "real world" is

drawing him back to earth and to itself) (341). The area around the plane is itself a *tabula rasa*, a privileged space comparable to the one erected, by means of a screen, around Tommy Wilhelm at the end of *Seize the Day*. As in the previous novel, the conclusion implies a limit to the claims made on "character" by narrative structure, and consequently a limit on our apprehension of "character" by means of that structure. A reading such as that offered by Baumbach is not really ours to take. Provisional, temporary, and "somewhat illusory" as that privileged space may be, it is nevertheless there, a remission from the "deeply readable" which cannot be grudged on the grounds of its spontaneity.

The novel itself anticipates the supposition that Henderson, even at the last, is enmired in solipsism. He spends much of his time escaping from literal and metaphoric cages, and the model for all such cells is the "unreality" which he had previously endorsed as his "scheme for a troubled but eternal life", by which he might elude the inner voice which rebelled against its diet of "'more and more illusions'" (307, 310). One might be tempted to read the whole of his story as a matter of "hovering all the way inside a jewel" (as he described his flight to Africa), in which Henderson is confined, without hope of parole or pardon, within the boundaries of his consciousness, never escaping into an actual awareness of a "real world" beyond (280). Yet, at however many removes that reality may be at the conclusion, Henderson is more inclined towards it than are his fellow passengers on the plane, their "dark faces (...) looking from within", their own "master-image" consisting in the "invisible first-class passenger", "a famous diplomat", for whom the rigours of international travel are leavened by supplies of "steak and champagne" (340, 335). As Henderson makes his climactic exhibition of himself, the novel – rather curiously, for a work by Bellow – makes a case for *visibility*, in that Henderson voluntarily sets foot *upon* the *tabula rasa* rather than conceal himself from sight. Henderson may not inhabit a "real world", but defers towards its existence, and tentatively, almost apologetic for such presumption, turns towards it: "I guess I felt it was my turn now to move" (341).

Henderson's trajectory describes a typically Bellovian arc, one which passes through a realm in which humanity's tendency to "grow all kinds of deformities and enormities" is reconfigured as a

satiric means to the narrative's end, in which, such encrustations having been discarded, a residue of "character" remains; a distilled essence, the persistence of which is anticipated by Henderson himself as, urged on by Dahfu, he pictures himself as "a literal lion": "I had claws, and hair, and some teeth, and I was bursting with hot noise, but when all this had come forth, there was still a remainder. That last thing of all was my human longing" (267). What is untypical about *Henderson* is the force it puts into that "longing", and the way in which it structures itself around that desire's inferred fulfilment, aspects of this novel to which this reading now turns.

6.2 Rehearsing "Henderson"

Eugene Henderson has his difficulties in getting his story started and, as this reading has argued, discovers its true beginning only near the novel's end; but the "end" of *Henderson* is not congruent with the limit towards which its central character moves, in that Henderson's particular situation as a narrator precludes him from conclusions as such. His situation is that of a consciousness between points, aligned in its path with its desired objective but at some distance from it. He presents evidence concerning the nature of the "Henderson" which precedes him, that is, the character which he depicts for us, and out of which he has developed. But Henderson the narrator is not himself a finished product, as the novel's structure anticipates the emergence, beyond the narrative's duration, of *another* Henderson, as if *Henderson the Rain King* were the overflow of that charismatic charge which possesses and propels its host consciousness towards its final (but deferred) incarnation. What drives that consciousness on also qualifies its manifestation as a narrating voice as a *rehearsal*, a preparation for the true performance yet to come, which will take place when Henderson is reunited with, and delivers his deposition to, his Intended, Lily.

Again, there is a female figure at the centre of Bellow's novel, whose seemingly marginal involvement in the story itself disguises the gravitational force she exerts upon the entirety of the text. Henderson, recalling the incident at Salerno, notes that Ulysses "too, was naked as the sirens sang", an allusion which cues the notion of Henderson as a hero embarked on an odyssey towards

reunion with his Penelope, but a more specific literary antecedent is to be found in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (22). Henderson, like Marlow, falls into delirium on his journey back from Africa, "demented and raving" for "most of the trek", in parallel to Marlow's "period of time which I remember mistily, with a shuddering wonder, like a passage through some inconceivable world that had no hope in it and no desire" (327).¹² Back in England, Marlow is obliged to *make sense*, to render Kurtz "that justice which was his due", a deposition suitable for an audience (which includes the novel's narrator) qualified by a common "bond of the sea", but "too dark altogether" for the ears of Kurtz's Intended (*HD*, 252, 135). The aspect of *Heart of Darkness* which bears most specifically upon this reading of *Henderson* lies in the *remoteness* of the Intended; Marlow's visit to her (and vision of her) drives him back from the truth about Kurtz's death, ecstatically prostrate as he is before her "ashy halo", before her "unextinguishable light of belief and love" (*HD*, 247, 248). "That great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow", her conviction that Kurtz "died as he lived" – that is, heroically – must be maintained (*HD*, 249). Marlow's report to the Intended, a fiction, restores her Ulysses to her in her grief, while it allows Marlow the notion of a home, a safe area, to which he can return, in which "the horror" has no acknowledged foothold. Henderson's "living proof" is a gift waiting to be given, the inverse of "the nightmare" with which Marlow is entrusted, to which "it was written I should be loyal", but which must be denied (*HD*, 231).

The juxtaposition of the two texts demands the consideration of a third; haunting both Henderson and Marlow, in their journeys back to their points of origin, is the spectre of Lemuel Gulliver returned to Redriff, moved to vocal dissent at the sight of "yahoos carried by Houyhnhnms in a vehicle", reunited in "the utmost shame, confusion and horror" with his family (and the fact that "by copulating with one of the yahoo species I had become a parent of more"), and dining "at the farthest end of a long table" from his wife, against whose "offensive" smell he keeps his nose "well stopped with rue, lavender or tobacco leaves".¹³ Kurtz's Intended, on his death, becomes *Marlow's*; both the destination of his travels and the limit of his journey, at which, by reinforcing her remoteness from the knowledge therein accumulated, imposes a sense of closure (whether tenable or not) upon his experience. Gulliver's wife suffers the full consequences of her husband's sea-change, and is kept

physically remote from her returned hero, who is comically unable to stomach the world which he no longer recognizes as his home. Gulliver's alteration in the course of his travels entails that he can't go "home" again, that, even in his eventual retreat to his place of birth, Nottinghamshire, he cannot extricate himself from the paradigm of the yahoo (neither his condition *as* a yahoo nor his consciousness of that condition). Marlow, by means of an accommodating act of deceit, circumscribes the yahoo revealed to him through Kurtz's "soul satiated with primitive emotions", through Kurtz's descent into the form of an animal "crawling on all-fours" (*HD*, 237, 232). In both cases, the impact of the yahoo upon the narrator's consciousness is measured through the way in which the narrator keeps his distance from the "Intended", as if he (or she) is in quarantine. Henderson's return to Lily anticipates no such obstruction to their reunion; indeed, Henderson's travels having been a variety of self-imposed "quarantine", Bellow's novel moves in a direction opposite to that evident in both Swift's and Conrad's, a motion in which it traverses similar territory and shares in some of those earlier texts' co-ordinate points.

All three texts (appear to) revolve around the discovery of the yahoo, as accomplished by Gulliver in the country of the Houyhnhnms, by Marlow in Africa, and by Henderson *in himself at home*, thus preceding Henderson's travels and providing the motor of the plot itself, Henderson's discovery of the yahoo being not something towards which the story gravitates but something which drives it forward for much of its duration. From the beginning, Henderson has himself in his sights as an object of anthropological interest and, consequently as a source of "horror". The anthropological model to which all three plots conform, and which holds implications for the whole of Bellow's body of work, is the rite of passage, as defined by Arnold van Gennep as falling into three stages, into "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)".¹⁴ According to Victor Turner's explication of these processes, the liminal is a zone in which the neophyte's culture, previously to be considered as a given, is disassembled into its "recognized components or factors", which are then recombined "in fantastic or monstrous patterns or shapes", "in ways that make sense with regard to the new state and status that the neophytes will enter".¹⁵ During this period, the initiates, the "liminal *personae*", "are at once no longer classified

and not yet classified", as they are instructed in "the nature of the *sacra*", "the wisdom (*mana*) that is imparted" being "not just an aggregation of word and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte".¹⁶ The debased natures of the states for which Gulliver and Marlow are prepared, by means of *mana* which parodies and undermines the pretensions upon which their cultures rest, prevents them from real "incorporation" back into those cultures. The discovery of the yahoo is an irreversible separation, a *sacra* which abolishes the world of which the neophyte intends to take a merely temporary leave. A journey undertaken between points – with the place of departure assumed as the ultimate destination – has its trajectory redrawn, and it is in his new condition that the hero's true conclusion lies.

Henderson, who thinks of himself as being "discontinuous with civilization" as he begins his flight home, does not have his eventual "incorporation" back into it included within the novel's narrative span. The process begins, however, when he is brought towards the orbit of his fellow passengers – "indifferent" to "the courts of eternal heaven" visible from their windows, their noses in their books – when a stewardess, noting that he is "overwrought", attempts to "calm" him with a proffered magazine (333). She informs Henderson, who admits to having "'lost count of time'", that "'it'll be Thanksgiving next week'" (334). Henderson is less concerned with placatory reading material than he is with the stewardess's resemblance to Lily – "you make me think of my wife", he avers, but then, never more so than in the novel's closing pages, almost everything makes Henderson think of his wife (334). He spends the night before Dahfu's hunt writing a letter to her, and the next day regrets the omission of "more things I should have told Lily. That wasn't all I had to say, I thought" (289). That he inherits, as rain king, Dahfu's retinue of wives prompts him to thoughts of Lily as "'all the wife I need'" (314). His memories of Smolak whet his narratorial appetite: "Lily will have to sit up with me if it takes all night, I was thinking, while I tell her all about this" (339). Looking forward to his imminent reunion, to his "Thanksgiving", with Lily, Henderson anticipates the "incorporation" which will divest him, at last, of the yahoo curse. His words with the stewardess are a rehearsal for the delivery of "all I had to say", the moment at which this Henderson breaks the surface of the North American reality to which it is returning. The scene's intimation is that

Henderson, unlike Gulliver and Marlow, will not find his acquaintance with the yahoo an insuperable obstacle to integration at home, in that he is not to be a prisoner of the "fantastic or monstrous patterns" which he has discovered.

The stewardess, like the woman at the elevator's controls in "The Old System", is a kind of angel, indicating the central character's point of exit from both the satiric sphere and the narrative itself. For liminality is the space in which Bellow's fictions set themselves up, an area in which his characters encounter a pan-deterministic world, imbued with potentials for meaning which are usually inaccessible, and the tendency of this environment is towards the satiric, as these meanings take the character within as their centre and their host; the liminal must be left behind if the "patterns" within it are not to enclose the neophyte wholly, and Bellow's characters make their attempts at escape along routes leading towards the female characters whose standing within the narrative – and, therefore, within the satiric domain – seems vague. The gravitational pull which these characters exert reveals another aspect of Bellovian liminality. Mircea Eliade writes of "the homogenous and infinite expanse of secular space", "in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation*".¹⁷ Such a space differs from that occupied by the religious man, who "need only decipher what the cosmos says in its many modes of being, and he will understand the mystery of life", in that the religious are promised the immanence of the hierophanic, that which "reveals an absolute fixed point, a center".¹⁸ He who believes himself to be free of such religious "reading" habits is nevertheless an interpretative "inheritor", "haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied"; although, for him, "the cosmos has become opaque, inert, mute", "the unconscious activity of modern man ceaselessly presents him with innumerable symbols, and each of them has a particular message to transmit, a particular mission to accomplish, in order to ensure or re-establish the equilibrium of the psyche".¹⁹

Such "equilibrium" is not, in Bellow's worlds, an unambiguous and attainable goal, as his novels methodically *disestablish* his characters' fraudulent senses of balance. More germane to Bellow's fiction is the notion of an "orientation", a direction out of (and which retrospectively illumines the

nature of) the liminal, satiric sphere. There can be no promise of "equilibrium", as that would validate a character such as Henderson's hunger for hierophany, for a cracking of his universe's codes, but what cannot be promised may be intimated, or signposted, and the experiences of Bellow's characters tend to generate a variety of hierophanic potential even as his satire turns their worlds upside down. This is due to the inevitability of the preference in satire for epiphanic over hierophanic orientations, for points of reference which cloister character with itself, with the evidence of its vanities and their consequences, rather than position it atop the "mystery of life". Epiphany is the pull of gravity, the adumbration of ambition, and its very inevitability, its ubiquity within the liminal zone, provokes each of Bellow's novels to tire of it, and eventually to align itself (and its central character) on a course towards a different kind of "making sense".

In the case of *Henderson*, the novel and its central character, disengaging from their satiric aspects, take their new bearings from points which reveal only towards the conclusion their topographical significance. With Atti, Henderson is awed by his own "grunting", as his "roars" take on the form ("I couldn't help myself") of "a cry which summarized my entire course on this earth", which Dahfu and Atti take in "as though they were attending an opera performance" (274). Henderson's lion song is shot through with atavistic lapses into language: "certain words crept into my roars, like 'God', 'Help', 'Lord have mercy', only they came out 'Hoooolp!' 'Mooooorcy!' (...) 'Au secours', which was 'Secooooooooor' and also 'De prof-ooooondis', plus snatches from the 'Messiah'" (274). This scene is the ironic fruition of a theme quietly introduced in the novel's earlier pages, where Henderson attempts "to reach my father by playing on his violin", a project complicated by the musician's wavering control over his own strength as, "clutching the neck of the little instrument as if there were strangulation in my heart, I got cramps in my neck and shoulders" (30). The violin turns the clumsy learner's excessive force back upon him, so that he pays the price for his own lack of subtlety. In his farmhouse basement, dedicating the "few pieces" he learns to his significant dead, Henderson is unknowingly in rehearsal for his recital beneath the Wariri palace: "down there in my studio I sang as I played, 'Rispondi! Anima bella' (Mozart). 'He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' (Handel)" (30). It is the Handel which recurs, as if testing Henderson's

patience, in parentheses: "(he was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, etcetera)" (274). For Dahfu, this is therapy, an engagement with a "'lifetime accumulation'" of emotion (275). For the novel, it might be a comic rebuttal of its hero's musical aspirations, and a demonstration of his inability to elude his besetting obsessions (such as language itself, and also the condition of the "despised and rejected" son of a distant father). But the scene's import is not only satiric, as, within the comic context of Dahfu's course of existential exercise, Henderson's potential as character acquires something resembling a solid foothold, through the implicit stress upon his commitment to *practice*.

The liminal demands a passivity of the neophyte, as one who is "no longer classified and not yet classified" must defer to the rectitude of the classificatory system which circumscribes its own temporary remission. It is a "transition" between fixed points, which overturns the hierarchies persisting outside its course only to solidify further their structures. *Henderson's* recurrent emphasis on the notion of *practice* is a riposte to the stasis implicit in liminality, to the disguised design which insists that the neophyte be incorporated into its pattern. In addition to his exercises upon the violin and his rehearsals of leonine roaring, the reader observes Henderson's ambition to become a doctor – that is, to become a medical *practitioner* – and, as this reading has argued, Henderson's monologue is itself practice, a rehearsal of the story to be related to Lily, rediscovered as his Intended (13). At the ceremony which culminates in his ascension to the status of Sungo, Henderson scratches Dahfu and a "gilded woman", perhaps "a priestess", playing "a game", or rather "a contest", with two skulls, the king throwing and catching with the "confidence" and "sureness" of "a fine tennis player or a great rider", "'like a true artist. Goddammit, an artist!'" (174/175). Henderson dreads the consequences "should either one of them stumble or let (...) the skulls collide", in that "they might have to pay the ultimate price" (174). It is through the well-practised "art" of such rituals that Dahfu is able to maintain (albeit temporarily) his supremacy over, and freedom within, the Wariri court. Happily for Henderson, the narrative ushers him towards a similar mastery of "art" which will allow him an escape from the "violence" to which he has feared himself to be condemned. The "game" which Dahfu plays, which is both a formal reinforcement of his regal status and a practical

demonstration of magisterial skill even as it allows these attributes to be tested, and thus questioned, asserts its precedence over he who plays it, the skulls in use being those of his ancestors, former players of the game, and so "some day" – sooner than he might think – Dahfu's "own skull will get the air" (176). The rules of Henderson's game are not so rigidly set.

The dialectical drive of Bellow's fictions demands that such systems of rules be exposed for what they are, that their power over their player be overturned, lest "character" be consigned to languish in the reified form exemplified by the likes of Gulliver and Marlow. To this end, the narrative's own part in the deception practised by liminality must be acknowledged and faced down, if the Bellovian hero is not to be rendered its hapless prisoner. Although the solipsistic tendencies of Bellow's central characters are underwritten to an extent by the reflexive textual structures which take those characters as their centres, that reflexivity is an obstacle for the characters to overcome, an agency of the "deeply readable", of the heavily influential. In Vladimir Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols", a suicidal young boy, diagnosed as suffering from "referential mania", inhabits a world resembling the one with which the "deeply readable" presents Bellow's central characters, in which "the patient" (for whom we might usefully read "Joseph", or "Wilhelm", or "Henderson") "imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence":

Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages which he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. (...) He must be always on his guard and elevate every minute and module of his life to the decoding of the undulation of things. The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away.²⁰

By virtue of his environment's purposeful devotion to the divination of "the ultimate truth of his being", the boy is placed at the centre of a world fashioned from the same reflexive material which enclosed Joseph in *Dangling Man*, a domain which in Bellow's subsequent novels threatens to take the central characters as its victims.²¹ The passage quoted might serve as an epigraph to that aspect of Bellow's work which this thesis takes as its subject, in particular the observation that "the very air that he exhales is indexed and filed away", a detail which, once cross referenced with Joseph's jealous guarding of his "waste" against the powers of sorcery, illumines the recurrent stress in

Bellow's fiction on "character" in relation to *expenditure*, on the costs levied upon a "theme" (such as Leventhal or Augie) by the "ciphers", including the narrative itself, which organize themselves around it. As the environment fills to its horizon with "ciphers", so the range of possibilities available to their "theme" becomes depieted, and that "theme", without a frame of reference beyond itself, is absorbed into the system, *ciphered*, rendered "readable" to its utmost depths, and elided.

* * *

If *Seize the Day* is *Augie March*'s coda, an exposure of the heavy influences persisting even in Bellow's "new kind of American sentence", then *Henderson the Rain King* attempts a more considered variation upon the "open form", a variation which bears in mind the oppressive patternings in which its immediate predecessor deals while combining them with the exponential force of "character" which drives *Augie March*. *Henderson* sets the Bellovian "character" in dynamic relation to an openly articulated set of terms, and allows the latter to be mastered by the former. Its "deeply readable" structures are laid so near to the surface of its discourses that it can be read as a Bellow primer, a comparatively transparent model of his narrative procedures. Its depiction of "referential mania" overcome is a paradigm for the Bellovian happier ending, a conclusion beyond *Augie March*'s reach (a failure implicitly acknowledged in *Seize the Day*). Henderson's world, which for much of the novel resembles Nabokov's oppressive system of "ciphers", an environment familiar in its taxonomical methods to Joseph and Asa Leventhal, proves by the novel's end to be playable as a game, in which selves, rather than skulls, are juggled, and in which the player, unlike Tommy Wilhelm, has a chance of winning.

7. On *Herzog*

In *Herzog*, Bellow's fiction folds in upon itself, in the most pronounced of its attempts to examine the relationship between its structures and the notion of "character". This "character", as evinced most clearly by *Seize the Day*, can be traced, if not fully apprehended, through its engagements with the textuality - with the "deeply readable" aspects of its representations - from which it strives to *disengage*. The texts themselves demarcate slices of a larger life (Irving Howe sees *Herzog*'s "final picture" as being that of its central character "in cross-section"), and within these divisions can be witnessed the attempts by that process of demarcation to carry itself to its logical conclusion, that is, the confiscation of "character" from itself, its connections to any world beyond the horizon set for it by the text severed, so that its reserves - its enigma, its freedom, its form - can be appropriated for the ends of "deep reading", incorporated fully into the play of textuality.¹ This process might be pictured by returning to the paradigm of the Venn diagram, within which "character" constitutes a circle, the circumference of which is being elided by the pressures exerted upon it by the very nature of the quadrilateral - the text - in which it is sited. In *Dangling Man*, the central character's "circle" initially intersects with those of others. Moses Herzog's engagements are not so much with his fellow characters as they are with the architecture of the text itself, with his narrator and, beyond that, Bellow himself. Howe argues that "we do not see Herzog acting in the world, we are made captive in the world of Herzog", a point made also in Keith Opdahl's summary of the "chief criticism" of the novel, that "the story is contained within the mind of the protagonist".² What such readings presume is that "the mind of the protagonist", "the world of Herzog", is *supposed* to be structured as being *laterally* open on the level of its "character" as it is manifested on the level of the story. However, the concerns of *Herzog* demand that "the mind of the protagonist" be *dissociated* from that context, in order that it be open to a *hierarchical* engagement with the narrative agencies operating above it.

Herzog's insistence upon addressing the overdetermining aspects of its own design marks a return to the anxiety which drives *Seize the Day*, and, in a less obtrusive manner, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, that is, the cost levied upon "character" by the narrative which adheres to it. With *Herzog*'s

hindsight, Augie March and Eugene Henderson can be read as the exceptions which prove the rule, in that the integrity of their "characters" is made possible only through the suppression of certain tendencies in Bellovian narrative which are usually granted something near to free reign. In *Herzog*, these tendencies, which are presented to Henderson in comprehensible and ultimately assimilable form, allowing him to tame the demons of metaphor which beset him, resume their assault on "central character", their efforts to displace and dissolve it, with renewed vigour. And, although Herzog is as capable as Henderson is of apprehending the nature of that which does not welcome his being, such insight cannot be deployed in his defence; Bellow raises the stakes by designating that power of apprehension as an overdetermining force *itself*. That which liberates Eugene Henderson serves only to enmire further Moses Herzog, to bind him faster to the objects of his horror or compassion. Craig Hansen Werner asserts that, despite Bellow's remarks on *Ulysses*, on its nullification of "the power of the mind" by "the volume of experiences", Herzog is nevertheless to Bellow as Bloom is to Joyce, in that "the fullest awareness" in both novels "belongs not to the ordinary character but to the extraordinary structuring agent, the artist".³ But, while it is true to an extent that Herzog's own abilities as an "extraordinary structuring agent" are rebarbative, reinforcing the grip with which textuality holds him, *Herzog's* project is, in part, to dismantle the power relation between "artist" and "character" which Werner sees prevailing within it.

In *Seize the Day*, Tommy Wilhelm is preserved from "nullification" only by the intervention of an agency seemingly distinct from the established mode of narrative; a benediction from on high, a *deus ex machina* which averts an *auto-da-fe*, the novel's conclusion involves an act of mercy which leaves its beneficiary as innately helpless as before. In *Henderson*, there is a limit placed upon the sphere of "nullification's" operations, in that the hero's vitality and resourcefulness never have to face the kind of opposition which is threaded through the very fibre of its immediate predecessor, and immediate successor, in Bellow's oeuvre. Henderson can sit happily at the centre of *Henderson the Rain King* in a manner unimaginable for Wilhelm, or for Moses Herzog. For them, their centrality to the novels in which they appear is a kind of torture, in which the "extraordinary", the "artist", an "agent" which should not be considered as congruent with Bellow himself, co-opts them for the ends

of its own design. Their narrators are, to borrow *Herzog's* coinage, "reality instructors", intent upon putting the central characters in their places as assigned for them in the scheme of a "reality" which Henderson was given to see as mere "pedantry".⁴ For Tony Tanner, "the effort" of *Herzog* is to resist the ends of such instruction, "not to let the information completely annihilate that part of the sensibility which is in fact the core of the self".⁵ Charles Kemnitz sees that effort fulfilled in a "victory of Moses' dialect over the variety of other dialects operating throughout *Herzog*", culminating in an "eventual sublimation of the authorial narrator".⁶ Our reading here follows, to an extent, Kemnitz's lead in particular, attending to the structural accomplishment and implications of such a "sublimation".

In doing so, this reading arrives directly before the problem of what Bellowian "character" *is*, a problem which necessitates the precautionary quotation marks. That which is educed into bearing the mantle of the "central character" in a Bellow novel finds (if it is so aware) that this dubious honour leaves it vulnerable to reification. Thus, "Moses Herzog" reacts against his "centrality", against his own "character", even as the text endeavours to divest him of these selfsame attributes. The Bellow hero's discomfort with his position, as previously noted in Asa Leventhal's submission to Kirby Allbee and in Henderson's desire to shed his first person voice, is motivated and enabled by that position's *porosity*, its helplessness before heavy influences, and by its *prescriptivity*, its enclosure of the essence for which "character" stands within the spheres of the *diagrammatic*. In drawing and naming circles within squares, this reading itself colludes in the latter process, itself "writes around" (in the etymological sense of the "diagram") that which would rather not be written around at all. *Herzog*, like *Seize the Day* before it, deals almost explicitly with the matter of readerly collusion in the co-option of "central character" as *middleman*, and consequently has something to it of *Invisible Man's* confrontational aspect, of the insistence, from which *Augie March* shied away, upon a levelling of hierarchies, upon a settling of scores.

7.1 *Herzog vs. Gersbach*

At the novel's beginning, Moses Herzog has "fallen under a spell", has been "overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends" (1, 2). He is "writing letters to everyone under the sun", "endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead" (1). Where Eugene Henderson is able to "make sense" to "you people", Herzog has no such receptive audience to which he can "explain" things, no Lily to whom he can "clarify" matters. His ability to do so, given the chance, is in any case open to question; early in the novel we read of his distracted demeanour before an audience of students: "he had the unconscious frankness of a man deeply preoccupied. (...) The class waited three minutes, five minutes, utterly silent" (2). Madeleine, Herzog's second wife, has pre-empted any such attempt at "explanation" by enlisting her husband as the audience for, and target of, a "performance", executed with "a certain theatrical genius", in which she announces to him the end of their marriage (8, 9). Evicting him from their home, spotlighted by "a great blot of flaming white" sunlight "on the center of the wall" above her, Madeleine rises into "an ecstasy of consciousness" in the course of her "speech", while Herzog realizes "that he was witnessing one of the very greatest moments of her life" (9). The scene itself reinforces the thrust of Madeleine's intent; although it is depicted through his recollection of it, and is appended with his vengefully violent fantasies of "what might have happened" had he not been given to "listening so intensely and thoughtfully", Herzog cuts a marginal figure at the scene of his own rejection, relatively a wraith when juxtaposed with her "distinction", her "brilliance", her "insight" (9/10). "It had never entered his mind (...) to stand his ground", as he prefers to set store by "the appeal of passivity, of personality", a stance, or rather a retreat, which relegates him, at the scene of Madeleine's apotheosis and for much of *Herzog* itself, to the role of "compulsory witness" (10, 72).

Herzog's letters are never sent. The audience before which he may "make amends" never gathers. He is alone with his testimony, sealed in with his own "obscure system of idiosyncrasies", with the exasperating contortions of a "personality" for which he "did not care" (10, 12). He is a "prisoner"

also "of perception", sentenced to ceaseless contemplation of the "particular", the "detailed", the "very rich" (72). Thus dissevered from the world, and divided within himself, he is sufficiently disarranged for *Herzog's* curious subplot of murderous revenge to hatch within him. It transpires that Madeleine has left him, taking their daughter June with her, for his friend Valentine Gersbach. Herzog comes to be convinced that the couple are a danger to the child, that June is being exposed to abuse as a result of her proximity to "those two grotesque love-actors" (258). "Recognizing that he had no power over his impulses", he decides to "claim the privilege of insanity, violence", "to kill with a clear conscience" Madeleine and Gersbach, and arrives outside their house armed with a pistol (241, 254). He there witnesses, through the bathroom window, Gersbach "tenderly" bathing June, and "his intended violence" is "turned into *theater*, into something ludicrous", exposed as a variation on Madeleine's mode of "performance" (257, 258). Gersbach's gentle reproaches to the unruly June – "okay, cut out the monkeyshines", "enough of this wild stuff" – are readable as instructions directed by Bellow's hand to the child's father, who subsequently awakes from his trance (257). He calls off his search for "truth in grotesque combinations" and moves towards a climactic disengagement from "the scene" in which that search has involved him, the "scene" as set for him by Madeleine and Gersbach, by the other "reality instructors" who incorporate him into their schemes, and by *Herzog* itself (272).

Herzog's involvement in the "theater" of revenge recalls *The Victim's* engagement with the melodramatic, in that both of these novels appear to be conducting experiments with the possibility of their own dissolution. Gersbach and Allbee materialize within the bodies of their host texts as emissaries of forces inimical to the coherence of the texts themselves. Theirs are *parenthetical presences*, in that the novels in which they appear must maintain their structures, the rules according to which they proceed and the realities which they authorize, in opposition to the negatory agencies granted residence within them. Allbee, the aspiring scenarist, strains against these confining parentheses, against his designated contexts, in an effort to rewrite *The Victim's* rules and realities which assign him his place. As previously noted, Allbee functions as an avatar of the authorial agency; his "reality", and his determination to "instruct" the central character in its terms, reveal him

to be a narrator in homunculus form, bridling at the parenthetical bell jar which holds him. And, in *Herzog*, Gersbach, a more protean, more fantastic, figure than the merely "theatrical" Madeleine, appears as a measure of distilled grotesque, a creature as chimerical as Allbee before him, whose mutability marks him as the potential nemesis of Moses Herzog and of Bellow's *Herzog* alike. Like Allbee, Gersbach is the gravitational centre of a "reality" which desires to impose its "instruction" upon its victim, and is figured in many respects as that victim's "double". Gersbach exists on the far side of a limit beyond which "character" cannot pass without giving itself up, a limit which closes in upon Herzog himself. In Gersbach's monstrosity can be found the definition of that which *Herzog* must define itself against, or collapse in the attempt.

Together, Madeleine and Gersbach constitute a variation on the theme concentrated, in "The Old System", in the figure of Tina Braun, although they notably lack her redeeming qualities and redemptive power. Herzog, like Isaac Braun, is evicted by a harsh mistress from his habitual domicile, Madeleine's ambitions as an intellectual forcing him from his accustomed academic milieu: she "*lured me out of the learned world, got in herself, slammed the door, and is still in there, gossiping about me*" (77). Tina administers the *pharmakon*, both poison and cure, to Isaac; Madeleine and Gersbach are poison and poison only to Herzog, their influence rising within him like the "acrid fluid in his mouth that had to be swallowed", "a metabolic poison, a flat but deadly flavor", which he tastes as he prepares to take his revenge upon them (239, 255). Madeleine, as the Proustian connotation of her name implies, is the catalyst for Herzog's sequestration with himself, for the course in reminiscence which he undertakes, but there is no prospect of reconciliation at that journey's end. The dislocation which she effects upon Herzog's point of view allows him to bear witness all the more acutely to her apparent inhumanity. By the point of their final meeting, in which "it gave him a headache merely to look at her", she is finished as a "character", any resemblance to humanity such as Herzog (and, indeed, *Herzog*) might recognize it having been elided under the force of the hatred which she emits and with which she is depicted (298). "Herzog marveled at her", "saw her with great vividness", "such a mixed mind of pure diamond and Woolworth glass": that she seems to be so fully absorbed into Herzog's apprehension of her, to be no

more than the sum of his reflections upon her brilliant, repellent surfaces, intimates that Madeleine the "finished product" is not *begun* as a "character" in the first place.

A good deal of the novel's energy is devoted to the depiction of Madeleine's awfulness, and of the awfulness in Herzog's vision of her. She is in part the source of, and in part the grounding for, Herzog's inner contention that women "*eat green salad and drink human blood*" (42). Herzog's behaviour towards, and other thoughts on, women are inconsistent with such a belief, and there is a suggestion that, in thinking so, Herzog is submitting to a pathological aspect of his own sexuality; elsewhere we read of the "immediate sexual power" exerted over him by what he perceives as "a sort of female arrogance", by "a round face, the clear gaze of pale bitch eyes, a pair of proud legs" (34). Nevertheless, in the novel's scheme, Madeleine merits the horror with which her former husband regards her. Her father, Pontritter, a "theatrical genius", has "many of the peculiar and grotesque vanities of theatrical New York in him", and she is her father's daughter, drawing Herzog, weakened by his "gratitude for art, (...) any sort of art", into "the drama of her life", in which "the parts" are "distributed" by herself (30, 107, 117, 38, 112). She assumes a series of roles, as the wronged daughter, as the fervent Catholic, as the apostate and intellectual, but behind these masks Herzog detects a single assertion of "sovereignty" by a "'sick'", "'diseased'" woman (126, 37). He sees in her a drive towards biological mutation, towards the negation of nature as he understands it, evinced in his observations on "the terrifying menstrual ice of her rages", on her conviction that "'she can be both mother and father'" to June (63, 87). His condemnation of her, to which the novel offers no obstruction, effectively *writes her off* as a "character", but does not obscure her indispensable function in Herzog's plan, hinted at in Herzog's conception of her as a kind of mutant: Madeleine is the conduit which connects Herzog with Gersbach, and with Gersbachian monstrosity, setting in motion the novel's lateral approaches upon the "character" of Herzog.

Herzog muses on "what it means to be a man" in the North American late twentieth century, amid "the pressure of human millions who have discovered what concerted thoughts and efforts can do. As megatons of water shape organisms on the ocean floor. As tides polish stones. As winds hollow

cliffs. The beautiful supermachinery opening a new life for innumerable mankind" (201). The perceived weight of those "millions" and the erosive power of their "thoughts" hark back to the milieu of *The Victim*, as does Herzog's claim that "'literate people appropriate all the best things they can find in books, and dress themselves in them just as certain crabs are supposed to beautify themselves with seaweed'" (217). Man may evolve into crab, or into something similarly less than fully human, as, "*a creature of deep peculiarities, a web of feeling intricacies*", he now approaches "*a level of organization and automatism where he can hope to be free from human dependency. People are practicing their future condition already*" (265). Gersbach is the advance guard, the pioneering practitioner, of this "future condition", as was the amphibious Allbee before him; his peg-legged walk strikes Herzog repeatedly as being that of a "gondolier", of a navigator upon the waters (5, 60, 256). Given that the gait which Gersbach affects takes Herzog's own as its model – "people say that Gersbach imitates me – my walk, my expressions" – it may seem that the crab Gersbach "beautifies" itself by appropriating the manner of the human Herzog (190).

Herzog contends that Gersbach styles himself as a "second Herzog", an usurper intent upon the eviction of his host: "he finished all your sentences, rephrased all your thoughts, explained everything" (190, 155). As such, Gersbach is well suited to be "the second Mrs Herzog's" partner in adultery, forming a triangle which casts the original "Herzog", the root of its structure, in the role of the "straight man" in "a comedy team" (19, 190). Gersbach, formerly thought of by Herzog as "the only reliable person on the scene", as the one to whom he must turn "when he needed a feeling reaction", and whom he names as "executor and guardian" when making his will, subverts what Herzog hold dear by reconfiguring it as farce (43, 58, 211). "The lectures Gersbach read him" are, in retrospect, "a parody of the intellectual's desire for higher meaning, depth, quality" (60). His job as "a radio announcer" leads into a career as "Gersbach the public figure, Gersbach the poet, the television-intellectual", as "a ringmaster, popularizer, liaison for the elites" of the "cultural Chicago" to which Herzog introduced him (6, 58, 215). Gersbach "appropriated all the emotions about him, as if by divine or spiritual right", and then exhibits the overriding sovereignty of his own:

"He sold tickets to a reading of his poems. (...) Five dollars for the front seats, three bucks at the back of the hall. Reading a poem about his grandfather who was a street sweeper, he broke down and cried. Nobody could get out. The hall was locked." (61, 196)

By such tactics, Gersbach the impresario attains the success of which Allbee dreams, while Herzog voluntarily fades from "the scene", desiring the comparative dignity of insubstantiality: "at moments I dislike having a face, a nose, lips, because he has them" (45). As Gersbach bodies himself forth as Herzog's parodic double, Herzog retreats from his appropriatable self.

Gersbach is a presence where Herzog is an absence, occupying the space made available by the latter's expulsion from his marriage and from his "cultural Chicago". Herzog eventually comes to see himself as the true objective of Gersbach's manoeuvres, rebuffing his advances in an unwritten letter: "*you will not reach me through*" Madeleine, although "*you sought me in her flesh. (...) I am no longer there*" (318). This assertion is made as Herzog is climactically reunited with his "mind", after an estrangement brought into play in the novel's opening sentence: "if I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog". This derangement, with hindsight, seems to invite, perhaps even to instigate, Gersbach's overtures. Given that Gersbach consistently gathers to himself whatever he can of Herzog – the latter being for most of the novel's duration not a discrete and unitary whole but a distributable quality, divisible and devolvable into, for example, Madeleine's "flesh" – he may be read as a representation of Herzog's "mind" in eccentric orbit around its once and future resident. As he moves towards his conclusive equilibrium, Herzog takes pity on "that Gersbach, call him any name you like, charlatan, psychopath", deferring to the "unknowable" aspect of his enemy's character which such "names" fraudulently claim to apprehend fully: "hard ruthless action taken against a man is the assertion by evildoers that he is fully knowable" (299). His "knowledge" of Gersbach and Madeleine which justifies his use of "hard ruthless action" against them emerges as being "knowledge" of mere "'constructions'" (272). Therefore, the pale fire with which Gersbach is illuminated, exposed as a grotesque, is not all stolen; some of it is freely invested by Herzog the structuring agent in his "constructions", in which he puts his "'whole heart'" (272). Consequently, Herzog may be read as both the author *and the satellite* of Gersbach, his double's double, their relationship not parasitic but symbiotic. Herzog's murderous plan promises to fulfil the

terms of that covert contract, bringing it to closure through his own commitment to "monkeyshines" and "wild stuff".

But Herzog's reference to Gersbach's "unknowable" essence resembles mere lip service, a grudging acknowledgment of his possible, yet highly unlikely, claim to humanity, when set beside Herzog's persistent apprehension of Gersbachian monstrosity. Herzog's first thought once his desire for revenge has dissipated is that the murder would have been more a bathetic act than an immoral one, for Gersbach is in truth *insubstantial*, "not an individual" but a synecdochic form, "a fragment, a piece broken off from the mob. To shoot him! – an absurd thought" (258). It is not so much his intention from which Herzog recoils as it is the premise on which that intention is based. Gersbach escapes summary justice in part because the *dimensions* of his monstrosity are shown to be a projection on the part of his would-be assassin, and in part because the peculiar quality of that monstrosity renders him *unmurderable*. Herzog's lawyer friend Harvey Simkin remarks to Herzog that Gersbach "really has got you", like "something in your bloodstream", but Herzog realizes that Gersbach is not the disease itself but a symptom of it (215). The "character" Gersbach dwindles and vanishes so that the disease, the larger force which he represents, of which he is "a fragment", can be foregrounded to an extent which satisfies the novel's structures.

Herzog writes, to Teilhard de Chardin, that "*matter itself should perhaps be studied as evolving consciousness*", and asks if "*the carbon molecule*" is itself "*lined with thought*" (159). Gersbach ultimately resembles an irruption of infinitely plastic "matter" into human form, his wooden leg an intimation of both his kinship with the inanimate and his "fragmentary" nature. Like the protean Allbee, he is revealed as being without fixed and recognizable "character", his likeness to the human in general, as with his likeness to Herzog, being a stratagem, in that he is not so much *human* as he is *likeness* itself, a demon which resembles in order to dissemble. He co-opts Herzog's "expressions" because he himself has "no *true* expressions" (257). His special talent, according to Herzog, lies in making "all sorts of people feel that he has exactly what they've been looking for" (Madeleine is "mad about him", as if he activates the pun latent in her name, 215, 19). In detailing the modalities

of Gersbach's shtick, Herzog characterizes him as the dealer of a single shape-shifting drug: "subtlety for the subtle. Warmth for the warm. For the crude, crudity. For the crooks, hypocrisy. Atrocity for the atrocious. Whatever your heart desires. Emotional plasma which can circulate in any system" (215). And Gersbach is himself as protean as the panacea in which he deals: "a man like Gersbach can be gay. Innocent. Sadistic. Dancing around. Instinctive. Heartless. Hugging his friends. Feeble-minded. Laughing at jokes. Deep, too" (193). He exhibits the "great need" of "modern consciousness (...) to explode its own postures", and, in meeting that need, "he makes realities nobody can understand" (193).

In this, in his apparent fulfilment (and more) of the fantastic desires nurtured in hope by Allbee and by *Augie March's* Basteshaw, and in the intimation that his "humanity" is a mask created by that which it contrives to conceal, Gersbach appears to be a villain drawn from beyond the representational limits familiar to us from Bellow's previous novels. This pusher of "emotional plasma" and architect of incomprehensible "realities" might be, in his extremity, a creature borrowed from William Burroughs or Thomas Pynchon, a variation on the former's Dr Benway (a charlatan physician and agent of pharmacologically induced control, "a manipulator and co-ordinator of symbol systems", with a face "subject at any moment to unspeakable change or metamorphoses"), or on the latter's V. (a polymorphous cyborg at the centre of a projected "conspiracy leveled against the animate world").⁷ Although Gersbach is ultimately readable as a comparatively realistic character, his intersections with the fantastic accountable for by grounding them within the sphere of Herzog's speculations, the dislocation which his presence in *Herzog* brings about in Bellovian reality should not be neglected, in part because through that dislocation can be seen Bellow's assertion that those accustomed representational boundaries referred to above, the authorized realities which he chooses to assemble and dismantle in his novels, are *self-imposed* – should the reader have been in doubt – and imposed for good reason.

Gersbach is Bellow's first, confrontational take (in fictional form) on authors such as Burroughs and Pynchon, a declaration of values which imitates certain aspects of his contemporaries' works – the

willingness to partake of "obscurity" and "hysteria", the elision of claims to an agreed (or agreeable) reality – in order to repudiate them. In 1963, Bellow writes of how "public life, vivid and formless turbulence, news, slogans, mysterious crises, and unreal configurations dissolve coherence in all but the most resistant minds", and goes on to argue that some writers wilfully aid and abet this process:

Among them there are some who gather unto themselves more and more and more power only to release it destructively on this already discredited and fallen individualism. In this they seem at times to imitate the great modern consolidations of power, to follow the example of parties and states and their scientific or military instruments. They act, in short, like those who hold the real power in society, the masters of the Leviathan.⁸

Burroughs is singled out as the author who has "most atrociously", "in a spirit of violence", derided "individualism", and is made to sit as the model for Bellow's portrait of the author as autocrat, appropriating to himself "power" which is then deployed, with the maximum of rhetorical force, in the interests of his own didactic ends.⁹ When Bellow refers to "power", to a "spirit of violence", he alludes to the representational extremes to which the likes of Burroughs will go; Gersbach's congruence with Dr Benway or with V. occurs where Bellow leaves off and his contemporaries warm up, in that the extremes that he permits himself are comparatively small change in their fantastic currency. His distaste, as expressed above and as is implicit in *Herzog*, is rooted in a perception of the self-aggrandizing aspect of such writing, its tendencies towards the imposition of its own versions of what's real, its desire to present its constructed "realities" – comprehensible or not – as *revelations of the truth*, or at least of the nearest thing to it. More offensive than the obscenities within the "plot" of *The Naked Lunch* is the pretension towards the apodictic which they serve; when Burroughs claims that his book's title "means exactly what the words say", referring to "a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork", the Bellovian sensibility responds with an "ugh".¹⁰ Burroughs, like Gersbach, does the work of "'modern consciousness'", which "'teaches the truth of the creature'", and, in throwing "'shit on all pretensions and fictions'", seeks to conceal and preserve its own "pretensions", its own "fictions", behind the mask of "the truth" (193).

If, "in his own books", the novelist, "usually by the method of *omission* (...) criticizes what he understands as the errors and excesses of others" (emphasis mine), then Gersbach is an exceptional instance of criticism by *inclusion*.¹¹ The incorporation of such a figure into *Herzog* dovetails with

that which is commonly implicit in Bellow's novels, that is, the text's awareness of itself as a heavy influence, as a form which organizes itself towards the end of structural cohesion at the expense of its content. The process enacted in *Dangling Man*, in which Joseph, the text's point of origin, the character who is taken as its content, is written off by the text's absorption of him into its own implacable patternings, becomes the recurring demonic plot played out (if not to its desired conclusion) in Bellow's subsequent novels. *Herzog* forces the issue raised in *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*, through its acknowledgment of the authorial agency – as represented in parodic form by Gersbach, and as embodied by the narrating voice itself, to which this reading will attend in its next section – as itself an "instructor" in "realities", as itself a life member of the devil's party.

7.2 *Herzog vs. Herzog*

The fragmentation of "Moses Elkanah Herzog" is read by Irving Malin as a disjuncture in Herzog's relation to his own story, as it "becomes his 'ideal construction'".¹² Keith Opdahl emphasizes the schism in Herzog's self, observing that "Herzog-Marlow recalls the adventures of Herzog-Kurtz".¹³ These assessments (which, notably, could have been made equally well of the plight of Eugene Henderson) direct us towards consideration of what "Herzog" constitutes *in his present tense*, that is, his relation to his own storytelling. *Herzog* actively obstructs such an inquiry even as it invites it, by means of that opening sentence, which seems to conceal any definable, definitive Moses Herzog within a plurality of unreliable selves; there is the "I" which may or may not be out of "my" mind, the "me" with which that's "all right", and then the "Moses Herzog" who thus dissects the situation, courtesy of the narrator who presents us with the conundrum as a whole. For Jennifer Bailey, this prefatory destabilization of the novel's central character is an "irony (...) unacceptable in that it undermines the rightness of Herzog's sensibility as a dramatic realization":

an arbitrary use of the first and third person, which makes it impossible to ascertain whether the irony is self-inflicted or imposed from a viewpoint in an omniscient position. The result is an assumed distancing in the prose which does not exist, causing the irony to assume a seriousness which places the validity of Herzog's inner reality in trouble.¹⁴

Bailey gives the implications of the novel's opening sentence the close attention which they demand, and arrives at the crux of the novel's narrational matter, but this reading, while following hers there,

differs as to what is to be made of this Gordian knot. In its insistence upon "the rightness of Herzog's sensibility as a dramatic realization" as the rule which divides acceptable from "unacceptable" ironies, and in its condemnation as "arbitrary" of the shift in voice, Bailey's argument, I think, misjudges what it describes.

The irony, whether it be Herzog's or his narrator's, is also, indubitably, *Bellow's*, and through it he brings into play a notion of "distancing" as being constructed precisely *as an assumption*, an assumption which is a kind of presumption as well. This "distancing" is a positioning of the narrating voice not at a fixed distance from Herzog's, but rather in a mode potentially, but not consistently, distinct from Herzog's. The narrating voice can zoom in, as it were, upon Herzog's "inner reality", quote from it, and then zoom out to its accustomed position in orbit around him. Throughout *Herzog*, as the narrator's voice gives way to Herzog's, and vice versa, there is a sense in which Herzog's "inner reality" is being made available, the "assumed distancing" under elision, in order that it may be violated, appropriated by the "outer" agency of the narrator. Bailey implies that Herzog cannot cohere as a character, inhibited by the free interpenetration of the nominally discrete but in truth "arbitrarily" divided first and third person voices, which renders the provenance of any "irony", or "reality", undecipherable. The reading here put forward agrees with Bailey's to an extent, but sees this elision as a part of, rather than a flaw in, the novel's design, a design which exposes and undercuts its own assumptions, and in doing so redraws a "distance" between Herzog and his narrator.

The problem at the centre of *Herzog* is its own sense of the coercive congruence which it initiates, this congruence being not that of Herzog with the narrating voice, but that of Herzog with *his narratable self*. The fissure posited in the opening sentence, the gap between the "mind" and the "I" through which the novel appears to issue, is not what Herzog thinks it is. That the opening sentence ultimately defies any attempt made to parse it - the dividing lines between the "mind" and the "I", between the various modalities of "Herzog", being indeterminate, intimates that there is indeed something fraudulent at work within it. What Herzog figures as a rupture in his self is, on closer

inspection, more akin to a loop formed by the contortions of his consciousness as it bends back in on itself, a curving *into* his mind rather than *out* from it. The motion of Herzog's "mind" and "I" along this loop carry them into the domain of the narrating voice, and it is at this point that the rupture occurs, and that the novel begins. When Herzog observes his "mind" as if from a distance, turns the modes of his consciousness into objects of that consciousness, he configures himself in narratable form, and as he does so the narrating voice takes up the invitation made to it. With this – "thought Moses Herzog" – the elements of coercion and fraud are introduced, in that this configuration works against Herzog's ability to *reconfigure* himself. His potential as character is expended upon the representations made of him by the narrator, as, rendered "fully knowable", Herzog is "characterized".

Each attempt on Herzog's part to restructure his self, to become "his own ironist", his own "extraordinary structuring agent", serves to reinforce the configuration in which he is confined. This pattern can be observed in the modulations of "Moses Elkanah Herzog"; the central character's name becomes a motif in itself as the digressive arcs of his thoughts return to it, and to consideration of his self in the third person. In the novel's earlier pages, the name recurs in concert with Herzog's moments of apparent epiphany in which, separating himself from his "mind", from his "personality", he positions himself relative to them:

Herzog momentarily joined the objective world in looking down on himself. He too could smile at Herzog and despise him. But there still remained the fact. I am Herzog. I have to be that man. There is no one else to do it. After smiling, he must return to his own Self and see the thing through. (67)

This is, in part, an implicit reference to Gersbach, who is willing, and in many respects able, "to be" a despicable "Herzog"; there is, possibly, someone else "to do it" after all. But the ambiguity central to this passage's import lies in the provenance of "there still remained the fact". As the narrating voice segues into Herzog's first person present tense, it performs a parenthesizing manoeuvre which calls into question "the fact" which, according to Herzog, "still" remains, a contention with which the narrator ostensibly concurs while simultaneously placing a limit on its claim to coherence. For, as the narrator briefly, seemingly, relinquishes his privileges, we are presented with a disassembled

Herzog, a consciousness (the "I") trying to align itself with its host (the "Herzog") while conceiving of it as a character distinct from itself ("that man").

H. Porter Abbott comments that "Herzog himself is reading Herzog", that "he reflects upon himself as he would upon a character. Thus, as confined as the book is to the interior Herzog, the mind we hear is continually engaged in trying to gain knowledge of itself by reading the acts it has a part in directing".¹⁵ Given the narrator's presiding agency, it would be more appropriate to stress that Herzog is *being read to* Herzog, that he is being "instructed" in the matter of his own "reality". The book is not "confined (...) to the interior Herzog" because the process of eviction by which the narrative works, here as in *Invisible Man* and *Augie March*, busily converts that "interior" into an "exterior", presenting the central character, in Howe's words, "in cross-section". Howe's static model, however, fails to stress that this is a process as well as a condition, a reading in progress rather than a completed operation. Herzog apprehends himself as an accumulation of fraudulent surfaces, observes the transformation of his "interior", his "I", into a series of "exteriors", of "Moses E. Herzogs". Hiring a car, he "himself would have been suspicious" of the "diverse addresses" detailed on the documents he uses "to identify himself", "to say nothing of the soiled, wrinkled seersucker suit worn by this applicant, Moses Elkanah Herzog" (241/2). Such dishevelment is entirely *characteristic*; his sartorial style is habitually "half elegant, half slovenly", "an established part of the daily comedy of Moses E. Herzog" (159). "Out" of his "mind", he sees it as if from outside; the loosening of his identity's moorings is produced by his recollections of the pre-*Herzog* Herzog's hubristic conviction that he was doing "the work of the future";

The progress of civilization - indeed the survival of civilization - depended on the successes of Moses E. Herzog. And in treating him as he did, Madeleine injured a great project. This was, in the eyes of Moses E. Herzog, what was so grotesque about the experience of Moses E. Herzog. (125)

In reaction against this particular M.E.H., against the "habitual vagueness, the proud air of abstraction in which Moses E. Herzog, Ph.D., had once been clothed", Herzog aspires to become "his own ironist", an attempt which cannot succeed as Eugene Henderson's does (159). The liminality which renders Henderson's crisis as a variety of *felix culpa*, a providential disordering which allows

the possibility of a new, improved Henderson, surfaces in Herzog only to perform an unexpectedly prophylactic function. Herzog's avenues of reorientation are consistently closed off, repeatedly reunited as he is with his "character"; *Herzog* enacts Henderson's "worst suffering", "the repetition of a man's bad self". Herzog, pondering his humiliations as Madeleine's husband, castigates himself as "Griselda Herzog", complicit in his own degradation (64). He heaps invective upon "this earlier avatar of his life, of Herzog the victim, Herzog the would-be lover" who becomes embroiled in the detestable "victim bit" (104/5, 82). "He, Herzog", had "tried to be a marvelous Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities vaguely comprehended", and, having failed, attempts to disengage from that "earlier avatar" (93). But the "I" finds itself to be interminably *in character*, the role being that of "the inescapable Moses Elkanah Herzog. Oh, what a thing I am - what a *thing!*" (206). He is incapable of maintaining the distance from "Herzog" which he would like to assume – on returning to it, he is no longer "smiling" - or to restructure the character with which he is made congruent into a more acceptable form. Addressing one of his unwritten letters to himself, footnoting himself in another, Herzog converts his modes of discourse into their own object, and in doing so becomes ensnared by his own dialectic; the prospect is that of Moses Herzog *en abyme*, his true "Self" endlessly deferred, the "I" forever looped in liminal symbiosis with parodic, characterized, versions of itself (68, 165).

The freedom of access to the Herzogian "interior" which the narrator exploits enables the process of characterization. The position of the narrator relative to Herzog resembles that of the biographer to his subject, the former's endeavour involving the grounding, by means of a definitive portrait, of the latter *in character*. A biographer's tendency towards the inclusive is also a tendency towards the exhaustive, the work's completion dependent upon its success in making a "finished product" of its subject, in becoming the master narrative from which its subject can find no exit. A biography's body is appended, and its inclusiveness implied, by its index; in Bellow's novels, the cohering structures of the "deeply readable" threaten to "index" fully the central character, to encode it according to their organizing principles. The summarizing "justice" which Bellow's biographer demon seeks for its subjects is done when that character's "conviction" is secured, and thus *Herzog*

reads the charges against "Moses E. Herzog" to the accused. Herzog becomes a "compulsory witness" for the prosecution, providing it with the evidence required, in a recapitulation of Joseph's situation in *Dangling Man* and of Tommy Wilhelm's in *Seize the Day*, his reserves depleted as their contents become grist to the narrating mill. Herzog attempts, as did Augie March, to account for himself before he is accounted for, even as that attempt leaves the self vulnerable to co-option by heavy influences. In this, *Herzog* refines the earlier novel's notion of that "reality" which "comes from giving an account of yourself"; that "reality" consists in the "I's" assertion of its primacy and of its right to privacy, its right to absent itself from the narrative which it constructs. Augie seeks to counter the biography which solidifies around him by means of a confessional stratagem, the confessional being the ritual accounting which inclines towards its reward and respite, that is, disengagement from the accounted "self", from the incursions of exposure, from that which educes the "I" into character and will not tolerate its desire for a measure of *invisibility*. The "I", as it acknowledges a congruence with its accounted "self", asserts its power to *choose* in such matters.

However, that which "chooses", which defies the claims made on it by biography, is necessarily elusive, is to be found neither in the "character" nor in the "I", given that the latter is looped with, is ineluctably carried over into, the former. Attempts to locate the irreducible essence of "Moses Herzog" in the text involve themselves in the process of "characterization", imitate the uses made of "Herzog" by *Herzog*. Towards the novel's end, Herzog explains that he himself is no stranger to this activity, that his writing of letters "helter-skelter in all directions" is a "struggle toward suitable words": "I go after reality with language" (272). He admits to pursuing Madeleine and Gersbach with "more words", "trying to keep tight the tensions without which human beings can no longer be called human":

"I've filled the world with letters to prevent their escape. I want them in human form, and so I conjure up a whole environment and catch them in the middle. I put my whole heart into these constructions. But they are constructions." (272)

Madeleine and Gersbach are not, in Herzog's conclusive analysis, "human"; the failure of their "humanity" to cohere and the persistent intimation of the monstrosity which it inefficiently masks are indications that their "characters" are Herzog's own "constructions", attempts to reconfigure their

inhumanity into comprehensible form. But this confession extends by implication to "Moses Herzog" himself, and, simultaneously, to the "I" which is speaking; as Herzog extricates himself from his symbiosis with Gersbach, and divests himself of the "encrustation" that is Madeleine, he also apprehends himself as a "construction" in "language", and begins to disengage from this narratable self (313).

Tony Tanner, commenting on *Augie March*, notes that the novel's minor characters lack the distinct sense of "character" merited by Augie, that they "tend to add up to a sort of general presence of the not-Augie as opposed to the Augie".¹⁶ What Tanner observes at work is Augie's motion towards consolidation as a *subject*, fuelled by the designation of the "not-Augie" as his *predicate*; organized so that they delineate to their fullest the contours of the "Augie" itself. Thus, the text's strategies of containment, its indexing strains of "deeply readable" metaphor, are turned back upon themselves, the division between "Augie" and "not-Augie" the proof of their failure to incorporate and dissolve the central character into their schemes. In *Herzog*, this process of predication recurs, in modified form, in that not only the "not-Herzog" but also the "Herzog" are placed at a remove from the centre of the central character. In temporary retreat in the countryside at the novel's end, Herzog savours a new-found sense of invisibility: "*In paths untrodden, 'as Walt Whitman marvelously put it. 'Escaped from the life that exhibits itself ...' Oh, that's a plague, the life that exhibits itself, a real plague!*" (324). Whitman's poem continues to eulogize a freedom "from all the standards hitherto publish'd", and sees "clear to me now standards not yet publish'd"; the "hitherto publish'd" Herzog, who "exhibits himself" for most of the book's duration, is jettisoned as the novel concludes with the "passing" of the letter-writing "spell": "at this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word" (341).¹⁷ As Herzog the "subject", the connoisseur of his own "exhibition", falls away into the predicated domain of the "not-Herzog", what remains of the central character in Herzog is a potentiality, a spectral contour left behind as "Moses Herzog" takes his leave of language for a while, a sense of absence marked by the voluntary dissolution of the presences which precede it.

Ultimately as "unknowable" as he comes to believe himself to be, Herzog's disengagement from Herzog nevertheless illumines a respect in which he is truly present throughout the text. Earlier in the novel, he writes to Spinoza: "*thoughts not causally connected were said by you to cause pain. Random association, when the intellect is passive, is a form of bondage. Or rather, every form of bondage is possible then*" (181). Spinoza's contention has contextual relevance for Herzog's desire for "formal stability" in thought, a desire frustrated in the dearth of "focus" in his "chaotic" studies, and mocked by "the whole of disintegrating space" in which he lives (219, 4, 241). What Herzog fears is the "bondage" of *infinite digression*, the fate of a mind that wanders without hope of being restored to itself. The novel takes his digressive habit of mind as its motor, and the digressions themselves as its building blocks. The text directs the digressions towards its own ends, towards the completion of Herzog's "character", even as those digressions offer apparent proof of the (possibly excessive) autonomy of his "discourse". As the narrator at one point interpolates, Herzog in digressive mode is Herzog "in his editorial state", a comment which asserts the narrator's superior "editorial" position (179). But, although his penchant for the digressive may estrange him from any point of origin, and lead him into convergence with the text's designs, it proves to be his inalienable reserve; from it, he draws the power to digress from digression, to exit into silence, to call an end to *Herzog*. If Herzog is a presence in the novel that bears his name, then he is to be found not in any quotable fragment of the text, nor in any summary of the story, but is to be traced, perhaps, in the patterns into which his animadversions fall, patterns which rehearse their own redundancy, which enable themselves to be climactically forgone.

* * *

In a passage during which Herzog thinks back to his familial origins, listening, as does Dr Braun in "The Old System", "to the dead at their dead quarrels", he remembers the "claim to exceptional suffering" made in his father's accounts of his experiences as an emigrant Russian (144, 148). This sense of epic personal grief belongs, at the time of remembering, to history: "we are on a more brutal standard now, a new terminal standard, indifferent to persons" (148). In exploring Herzog's

engagement with those forces "indifferent" to his "person", with the "terminal standard" set in the story by Gersbach and configured in Herzog himself by his "bondage" in "constructions", this reading has dealt only indirectly with much of the novel's "not-Herzog".

The failure of his marriages, to Madeleine and to his first wife Daisy, considered alongside his involvements with other women – Wanda, Sono, Ramona – indicate that *Herzog*, like *Dangling Man* and *Henderson the Rain King*, has within it a marriage debate of sorts, his relationship with Ramona representing its (happy) ending. But Gersbach also is Herzog's "lover", looking for him in Madeleine's "flesh", and Ramona, too, is a "reality instructor", "a priestess of Isis" who says she understands "his needs better than he", who thinks she can "restore order and sanity to his life" by means of a mutual "erotic Renaissance" (160, 184, 185, 186). Other characters consistently exhibit the Gersbachian drive towards "instruction"; the lawyer Sandor Himmelstein asks "what the fuck" does Herzog "know what it is to face facts", the academic Shapiro writes history which is in large part "imaginary", "utopian fiction", and the romantic Nachman is given to "lecturing in his unreal way" with "boring persistent power" (83, 77, 133). A trial for child murder on which Herzog sits in by chance provides further impetus for his murderous resolve. All roads lead to Gersbach, the gravitational centre of *Herzog*, the villain who occupies the position held (although for the central character's betterment) by Iva in *Dangling Man* and by Lily in *Henderson*.

For most of the novel, Herzog is parenthesized by Gersbach, operating on his enemy's terms, possessed by his own "double". The exorcism enacted by Herzog's disavowal of revenge has similarities with Henderson's enforced disengagement from his friend Dahfu; both African king and American impresario are sacrifices, Dahfu perishing so that the Wariri tradition may continue, and Gersbach suffering a fully merited consignment to the "not-Herzog", to the sphere of the deeply, inhumanly, "readable", so that Herzog may extricate himself from it. As the influence of the Gersbachian recedes, and Herzog's better future with Ramona seems assured (he anticipates their "work" together), it only remains to be rid of the parenthesizing diagram of *Herzog* itself, to implicitly prefix the novel's title with its own "not" (314). As an analogy for its own impending

detachment from its central character, the novel sites towards its end a conversation between Herzog and his brother Will, in which Herzog recalls their bootlegger father's application of "'phony labels'" to "'those dark green lovely bottles': "'White Horse, Johnnie Walker, Haig and Haig, and we'd sit at the table with the paste-pot, and he'd flash those labels and say, "Well, children, what should we make today?'" (333). The young Moses's favourite "'was White Horse'", and the older Moses laments that "'they don't make glass like that, in those shapes, any more'" (333). Soon after, preparing for a visit from Ramona, Herzog retrieves some wine which has been chilled in the nearby spring: "the labels had washed off" (340). This echo of the earlier conversation invites "deep reading" in order to hand it its notice; the centre of the central character named "Moses Herzog", like the wine, endures, unreadable, once divested of its arbitrary "label".

8. Conclusion, by way of *Mr Sammler's Planet*

Saul Bellow's "central" characters are, in truth, *doubly decentralized*, firstly by the "deeply readable", which works towards the dispersion of "character" into the structures of the text, and secondly by the climactic remission of such efforts, by the saving grace which sets the centre of the central character beyond reading's reach, implicitly excises it from the sphere of the text's manoeuvres. Tommy Wilhelm and Moses Herzog suffer from a kind of transparency which is superseded, at the last, by an opacity which, obliging "deep reading" to leave them be, renders them ultimately as *invisible men*. As his work proceeds, the sense of Bellow's endings lies increasingly in their cancellation of the text's presumptions, in their relocation of "character" to a world elsewhere. Herzog relives the plot of Joseph's parodic passion, descending into a deadlocked epistolary struggle with what is presumed to be his "self", but, crucially, is eventually granted his freedom. Just as *The Victim* tacitly castigated *Dangling Man*'s hermetic aspect by means of an engagement with the "serious", so *Mr Sammler's Planet* reacts against *Herzog's* comparative neglect of social and political realities, its preference for farce and intellectual play, by devoting itself to the matters of real violence, of real murder. In doing so, it brings to bear upon Artur Sammler a "deeply readable" pressure which decentralizes the central character in a manner neither sadistic (as in *Seize the Day*) nor playful (as in *Augie March*), but reluctant, and mournful. And there is a consequent torsion in the novel's conclusion; as the "deeply readable" recedes, there is a sense in which it takes Sammler *with* it, if not entirely then in great enough part for the residue to be considered, possibly, as negligible.

Sammler is, like Moses Herzog, a deep reader of his "self", and, like Dr Braun in "The Old System", a curiously spectral figure; Herzog's reaction against his own Gersbachian "face" is continued in the attenuation of these subsequent characters' presences. Sammler, a septuagenarian not quite at home in the New York of the late 1960s, who feels "sometimes quite disembodied", dreams of being "emancipated from telluric conditions" by means of an emigration to the moon.¹ On earth, he sees himself as "a vestige, a visiting consciousness", "a fragment", "a symbolic character" (73, 182, 91). He is conscious of "openings in his substance", "holes, lacunae", an awareness which prompts him to

conceive of himself as a work of art (or, at least, as an artifact), "as if he had been cast by Henry Moore" (43). From the outset, he is partially disassembled, apprehensive of a failure to cohere. The "openings" are also gaps in his defences, through which "creaturely conditions" make their claims upon him even as he aspires to be "perfectly disinterested" (118, 117). There are "lacunae" not only in his being, but also in his perceptions; he is tormented by his sense of physical "conspicuousness", and in particular by the possibility of his being "seen seeing" as he observes a pickpocket at work on a bus, while dismissing the pickpocket's victim as "having Zero instincts, no grasp of New York" (4, 5, 10). However, as the narrator takes pains to point out, Sammler is not the urban sophisticate he considers himself comparatively to be, "didn't appreciate his situation" in New York, and has a "style of striding blind" in front of traffic (6).

Having narrowly escaped being murdered, as a Jew at the hands of the Nazis in war time Poland, Sammler has only one good eye and that has a mote recurrently accreting, "a speck at the corner which he couldn't scratch out" (87). He wears "smoked glasses, at all times protecting his vision" (5). His "remote considerations" of "the moon, its lifelessness, its deathlessness", figure it as "a white corroded pearl. By a sole eye, seen as a sole eye" (105). Sammler orbits his "planet" as does "the visiting moon", and carries, in the form of his colder eye, a model of that "moon" in his head (197). His adventures are designated by the novel's conclusion as arcs described around the deathbed of his nephew and benefactor Elya Gruner, who reappears in his thoughts "strangely and continually", "as if he were a satellite", but who is in truth the novel's gravitational centre, who exerts the force which compels the satellite Sammler to be "human" (223). His adventures, his involvements in being "seen seeing", by the narrator's eye, are reluctant engagements with a "humanity", an "idiot genius of a creature", which plays "with all varieties of possibility, with antics of all types" (74/5). The demonic play of metaphor fomented by Tina Braun in "The Old System" is perceived as the only mode of life available:

Humankind watched and described itself in the very turns of its own destiny. Itself the subject, living or drowning in night, itself the object, seen surviving or succumbing (...) - mankind's own passion simultaneously being mankind's great spectacle, a thing of deep and strange participation, on all levels" (73)

As "Art increased" its hold on "the life of humankind", so followed a "chaos" of "more possibility, more actors, apes, copycats, more invention, more fiction, illusion, more fantasy, more despair", "looting Art of its wealth", "pressing itself into pictures", "reality forcing itself into all these shapes" (148). As Sammler's comparison of himself to a sculpture intimates, he is to an extent aware of how this malaise infects him as well. He recognizes that he is attempting "to obtain his release from being human", and towards the novel's end sees himself as being "someone between the human and nonhuman states, between content and emptiness, between full and void, meaning and not-meaning, between this world and no world. Flying, freed from gravitation" (251, 290). By this point, the prospect has come to appear decidedly unattractive, a variation on what Sammler has seen as a general "longing for nonbeing", or, rather, a desire "to visit all other states of being in a diffused state of consciousness, not wishing to be any given thing but instead to become comprehensive" (235). He seeks a reconciliation with himself as a "given thing", with the "human" - that is, with "content", with the "full", with "meaning", with "this world". "This world", according to *Mr Sammler's Planet*, is one immersed in "fiction" and "fantasy", resembling a postmodern heterotopian zone: "the many impressions and experiences of life seemed no longer to occur each in its own proper space, in sequence, each with its recognizable religious or aesthetic importance", as "all the ages of history" become "simultaneous" (26). "You opened a jewelled door into degradation, from hypercivilized Byzantine luxury straight into the state of nature, the barbarous world of color, erupting from beneath" (7). But, however ontologically unstable "this world" may be, Sammler's assumed ground giving way to what was formerly "beneath", the postmodernist abyss is negotiated, if only just; Sammler's own *artifactuality* is taken apart by the novel's structures to reveal, climactically, the "recognizable religious or aesthetic importance" which is its fixed point of reference.

Sammler's daughter Shula - "obviously a nut", thinks her father, with her wig worthy of "a female impersonator" - "is determined that he write a memoir of his friendship with H.G. Wells in the London of the 1920s and 30s (21). To this end, she purloins from Dr Govinda Lal the only copy extant of his treatise on *The Future of the Moon*, anticipating its relevance to her father's

autobiography (which he has no intention of writing). As the ensuing complications multiply before their eventual resolution, Sammler is "seen seeing" a variety of essentially comic phenomena. An attempt to address an audience at Columbia University on the topic of "the British scene in the thirties", an event organized by Lionel Feffer, an "ingenious operator" at work in the "gas city" of New York, is cut off by the profane interjections of a protesting student (Sammler's reminiscences are "'shit"; "his balls are dry. He's dead. He can't come", 38, 143, 42). The pickpocket, having seen himself being seen, follows Sammler to the lobby of his apartment block, where he wordlessly insists that Sammler watch as he exposes himself. Sammler's visits to Elya Gruner's bedside take him into the paths of the dying man's children, Angela and Wallace, who make their customarily unwelcome infringements on his consciousness. Shula's violent and insane ex-husband Eisen arrives from Israel to make his name as an "artist" (154). Having met Dr Lal at the Gruners' country house, and arranged for the return of his manuscript, Sammler returns to Elya's bedside but, delayed by a roadside altercation in which the pickpocket, violently retrieving a camera from Feffer who has photographed him at work, is himself beaten brutally by Eisen, arrives too late "to say what might be said, or should be said" to his friend (259).

What comes across most consistently, and most pungently, during the course of these events is Sammler's professed aloofness from, and accompanying "interest" in, matters sexual: Allen Guttman rightly comments on Sammler's "almost pathological view of sexuality".² From the novel's first scene, Sammler is immersed in the sensuality which he disparages in others. Waking in his room, he touches his electric blanket, and finds that "the satin binding was nice to the fingertips"; he performs what were previously the tasks of his "cooks and maids" in England "with a certain priestly stiffness", while finding "amusing" the "quiver of vivacity" in "old women wearing textured tights" and "old sexual men" (4, 7, 8). He looks out over his "eastward view", a "soft asphalt belly rising, in which lay steaming sewer navels", sees television aerials as "whiplike, graceful, thrilling metal dendrites", takes his onion rolls from a "transparent uterine bag" (9, 8). So far, Sammler reads like a reprise of Dr Braun, but, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Sammler's one good eye is uniquely given to *roving*. He rails against the advance of "dark romanticism", of "the sexual ways of

the seraglio and of the Congo bush" taking hold in New York, and does so with imagery of startling hyperbole: the students employed to read to him have "the helpless vital pathos of young dogs with their first red erections", and the pickpocket's penis is a "lizard-thick curving tube", "dusty stale pinkish chocolate color and strongly suggesting the infant it was there to beget" (32, 37, 65). At one point, Sammler traces "an imaginary line of illumination" from Shula's widow's peak "down between the breasts to the middle of the body - what problems there must be" (22). He believes that his observations on "females", on their tendency to "grossness", on their need for "more washing, clipping, binding, grooming, perfuming and training", on "the drafts" which "must blow between their legs", originate "mainly in kindly detachment", in "earth-departure-objectivity" (36, 133/4). So convinced is he of his "detachment" that he behaves as if he were sexually invisible, insubstantial; when he walks in on Shula as she bathes - he doesn't knock, but he does switch on the light - he sees her "trying to cover her breasts with a washcloth", and notes "the black female triangle, and the white swellings with large rings of purplish brown" (194/5). That he is causing his daughter discomfort by his presence is inconceivable for, or irrelevant to, him; her protestations are "nonsense" (195). But the consistent focus for Sammler's deracinated lechery is Angela Gruner, who regales him with tales of sexual misadventure while he inwardly cringes. But, even as he observes with distaste her "sensual womanhood without remission", her "misleading and corrupting power" over her lovers, he seems to relish that which he condemns in her (30, 69). There is not as much "detached and purified dryness" in his contemplation of her clothing, or shortage of it, as he thinks there is: "what were those tights - sheer, opaque? Where did they lead?" (30/1). Noting her "breasts" as "a burden, knees bulging pale against the taut silk of the stockings", he chastely covers "his lap" with his hat (151/2). Bellow seems to pair each of Sammler's judgments of Angela with a compromising *double entendre*: Sammler, asking himself how he came to be her confessor, thinks that he had "perhaps extended himself a little" into the role of "the ripe old refugee" (69). As he lies in bed listening to her stories, "a tense stitch between rib and hip" makes him "draw up one leg for an ease he did not attain" (72). She arrives at her ailing father's hospital bedside in a "microskirt", but Sammler does not admit "prejudice" here, as he is thinking of her relationship with Elya, in which "much larger powers of distortion were at work" (295/6). Although Angela herself maintains

that "'a woman is a skunk'", a carrier of "'so many odors'", Sammler concurs with such a view with a rather suspect enthusiasm (71). Even "a female bum drunkenly sleeping like a dugong" on a park bench does not escape Sammler's tumescent gaze, as he bears witness to her "sea cow's belly rising, legs swollen purple; a short dress, a mini-rag" (106).

That Sammler is thus being incorporated into one of the novel's "deeply readable" structures is confirmed by the co-ordinating points of his visit with Angela to an "exhibition" - "in the strictly sexual sense also" - at the Museum of Modern Art, an "opening" which reminds Sammler of how "old Picasso was wildly obsessed by sexual fissures, by phalluses"; of Elya's attitude towards Angela, unconsciously "always smiling at her boobs" (according to Wallace) in earlier times, now dismissive of her as "'a dirty cunt'"; and of H.G. Wells, remembered by Sammler as "a horny man of labyrinthine extraordinary sensuality", driven to distraction in old age by "the agony of parting with the breasts, the mouths, and the precious sexual fluids of women" (66, 98, 177, 28). Angela and her most recent lover, the "physical culturist" Wharton Horricker, are present in the novel as parodic repudiations of Wells's fantasies of sexual revolution and of the "more vital human type" who was to create and populate his utopia (70, 72). As Judie Newman comments, *Mr Sammler's Planet* is so constructed that "each major idea is encircled, ironically, by parodic re-enactment".³ Sammler's niece Margotte, for instance is involved in a debased recapitulation of her late husband's role as a political theorist, immersed in "earnest examination *ad infinitum*" (67). Wallace, a spoilt child in pursuit of transcendence at any cost, with a will "'to crash out of the future my father has prepared for me'", attains his "'seventh heaven'" by means of crashing an airplane; his peripatetic disasters take those experienced by Augie March and Eugene Henderson to a moronic extreme (245, 297). But it is the avowedly "disinterested" Sammler who is the nexus of the novel's covert interests; the point at which his sense of himself as a "fragment" shot through with "lacunae" meets his preoccupation with the sexual projects him into the novel's "deepest reading" of "this world" - that is, the effort of "character" to cohere according to its own imperatives in the face of forces which wield their disintegrative power with *surgical* precision.

As a captive of the Nazis, and then as a partisan in the Polish countryside, Sammler is schooled in the vulnerability of bodies; his wife perishing in the massacre which he survives, he is "not entirely human" when, "dispensed from pity", in "bliss", he shoots in self-defence a German soldier, unmoved by "the pleading of a distorted face and sinews spreading into the throat" (139, 141, 140). Sammler's first shot is insufficient to his desires - "the body then" merely "lay in the snow" - and a second is required, which "went through the head and shattered it. Bone burst. Matter flew out" (139). Later, "hidden in a mausoleum" from genocidal Poles, Sammler metamorphoses into one apprehensive of himself as "a symbol" within systems; at this time "he first began to turn to the external world for curious ciphers and portents", seeing "symbols everywhere" in the minutiae of the environment, "many larger forms of meaning" having been "stamped out" (89-91).

And during this period there was a yellow tinge to everything, a yellow light in the sky. In this light, bad news for Sammler, bad news for humankind, bad information about the very essence of being was diffused. At its worst it seemed to go something like this: You have been summoned to be. Summoned out of matter. Therefore here you are. And though the vast over-all design may be of the deepest interest, whether originating in a God or in an indeterminate source which should have a different name, you yourself, a finite instance, are obliged to wait, (...) in this yellow despair. (90)

This "yellow light", which recurs in the apartment he temporarily shares with Shula in New York, and again, "sweet" and "horrible" in the hospital at the novel's end, illuminates Sammler's sense of being "internally eaten up. Eaten because coherence is lacking. Perhaps as a punishment for having failed to find coherence" (92, 300). It is "the light" of "diffused" meaning, of "information" demanding to be "deeply read", which penetrates where "coherence is lacking" and accelerates its decay. Conjured as he is from "the female generative slime", "summoned out of matter", Sammler's begrudged share in the "very essence of being" demands that he be open - or *opened* - to such "bad news" (82). Sammler echoes Job's protests to his God that he is being "'magnified unbearably'", and recognizes that he himself is "petitioning" for exemption from being so "magnified" (232, 251/2). This sense of oppressive "magnification" in the midst of "a vast over-all design" authored by some possibly indifferent or malevolent "source" is manifested in *Mr Sammler's Planet*, as in Bellow's previous novels, not only in the central character's apprehension of his environment, but also as an anxiety evident in the text's "over-all design". But, where Augie March's experiences of such "observation" present his escapist genius with obstacles eventually (and ambiguously) surmountable, Artur Sammler's particular incoherence has no reserves with which to face down

"magnification"; he disintegrates under its lens, the "light" which it focuses upon him, a light which is powered in part by his own consciousness, exposes his fragmentary, vestigial being as one beyond reclamation. His vulnerability beneath it is akin to that of the body beneath the surgeon's knife, an instrument which recurs in the novel as an implicit motif. The pickpocket handles a purse with "the touch of a doctor on a patient's belly", tugs the clothes of another victim "like a doctor" whose "clinic patient" is under the knife: "the mouth *open* with false teeth *dropping* from the upper gums. Coat and jacket were *open* also, the shirt pulled forward like *detached* green wallpaper", and finally the wallet itself is "*open*" (emphases mine, 10, 46). When Eisen intercedes on Feffer's behalf, he strikes with murderous "discipline"; he "took the man's measure", "gashed his akin", Eisen's scalpel - a bag of his "work", "rough heavy metal medallions" - returning "very wide but accurate" to penetrate the pickpocket's flesh again: "the blood ran in points on his cheek" where "the terrible metal had cut him" (290, 169, 171, 291).

What validates these details as components of the novel's central strain of metaphor is their relation to Elya Gruner, a surgeon who cared little for his profession but nevertheless "did what he disliked" (303). Sammler dislikes it, too: "surgery was psychically peculiar. To enter an unconscious body with a knife? To take out organs, sew in the flesh, splash blood?" (283). But Elya is now on the scalpel's receiving end; an aneurysm necessitates his hospitalization, and, "completely in the surgeon's hands", he is fitted with "a gimmick" in his throat intended to forestall a haemorrhage (80, 79). The bandage around his neck is like a "collar", concealing the point at which Elya's already faulty flesh has been "hooked" (151, 284). Such tropes set Elya in comparison with the pickpocket, the bad physician whose operations culminate in his efforts to "choke" Feffer, "squeezing", "screwing the *collar* tighter" (emphasis mine, 288, 289). The repetition extends to include the "sinews spreading into the throat" of the doomed German soldier on whom Sammler himself practises the "very harsh surgery" of war (230). But the most extreme of these practitioners is Eisen, a man seen by Sammler as being, like himself, "very far out", "orbiting", but around "a very different foreign center" (289). Eisen, still in thrall to the procedures of the war ("you can't hit a man like this *just once*. When you hit him you must really hit him") is not so much the master of the "knife" as he is

the blade itself, with his "shining sharp senseless saliva-moist teeth" which "deserved a saner head", "grinning" as he batters the pickpocket (emphasis mine, 291, 24, 167, 290).

Returning from Eisen's inhuman "orbit" towards Elya, this reading encounters, again, the pickpocket. His exhibition of his penis is "intended to communicate authority", thinks Sammler, employs the phallus as "a symbol of superlegitimacy or sovereignty" (55). The pickpocket's opening of his clothes (he "unbuttoned himself", Sammler "heard the zipper descend") asserts his reservation of the right to uncover the flesh, his own as well as that of his victims (49). His display of it in "its own right", as "a separate object", is also a demonstration of his power to perform symbolic "surgery" on his own body (55). The penis itself, "half-tumescent in its pride", in its resemblance as supposed by Sammler to its future "infant" progeny, is a model of self-sufficiency, not so much an instrument of procreation as a template for its own replications (55). The pickpocket, before his "sovereignty" is overthrown by Eisen's lunatic, *systematic* violence, is present in the text as a paradigm for the *autonomous inhuman*, for the penetrative power which "opens" Sammler's being with impunity. As Sammler makes his last journey towards Elya's bedside, he thinks of his friend as being "accessible", "now perhaps more than ever": "Elya's was not one of those sealed completed impenetrable systems, he was not one of your monstrous crystals or icicles", not one of your (supposedly) suitable forms (260). The pickpocket, until he encounters a physician even worse than himself, is an "impenetrable system" whose "monstrous" cohesion serves the novel's design by implying the value of Elya's "failure to cohere".

In conversation with Dr Lal, Sammler abjures his destination moon, and his dream of "lunar chastity" (67). Reluctant "to speak his full mind. Aloud!", Sammler is asked by Dr Lal to "view it as a recital rather than a lecture", a suggestion which Sammler welcomes, while commenting that "recitals are for trained performers. I am not ready for the stage" (226). And afterwards, Sammler seems to feel that he has broken a vow of silence: "he had explained, he had taken positions, he had said things he hadn't meant, meant things he hadn't said" (247). He is nevertheless resolved "to go to the hospital and say something", "compassionate utterance" being "a mortal necessity", although

"exactly what should or might be said Sammler did not know" (260, 261, 259). Thus, the ending of *Mr Sammler's Planet* seems to promise a recapitulation of "The Old System's" conclusion, just as Sammler's early morning rituals at the novel's beginning recall those of Dr Braun. A conversation with Angela at the hospital forces the comparison; Sammler observes that Elya, "'treasuring certain old feelings'", is "'on an old system'", while Angela recoils from what she sees as Sammler's wish for "'an old-time deathbed scene'" (as desired also by Isaac Braun) between father and daughter (302, 306). But *Mr Sammler's Planet* makes a point of its own "failure to cohere"; the concluding harmonies of "The Old System" are unavailable in this particular "recital". At the last, Sammler's desire for "compassionate utterance" having been frustrated by Elya's death, the novel reveals itself to have been involved, like *Seize the Day*, in an examination of its own elegaic potential.

Descending to the morgue to bid his friend farewell, Sammler's semblances of "cohesion" are themselves dismantled: "he felt that he wa breaking up, that irregular big fragments inside were melting, sparkling with pain, floating off" (312). His eulogy, delivered in "a mental whisper", ponders "'the terms'" of Elya's fulfilled. "'contract'" with "'God'" – terms "'that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know'" (313). While "The Old. System" works itself up to its climax, *Mr Sammler's Planet* seems to dwindle towards its own; while Dr Braun is given substance by the tears which well in his eyes, Sammler is rendered ever more bodiless until all that remains is a "mental whisper". While Moses Herzog disengages from the verbal, words are all that remain of Sammler, the last surviving trace of his "coherence". Sammler never attains the mastery of his own vanities as gained by Eugene Henderson, and, having placed his faith in the success of his "recital", finds that Elya – his audience, his Intended – is ultimately inaccessible. His attempt to penetrate the boundaries of his "inward style" depletes his reserves, tacitly concedes that such a "style" is solipsistic (a variation upon Joseph's cult of the closed mouth), and leaves him at the conclusion with no abode, fixed or otherwise, to which he might return (259).

The opacity which usually saves the Bellovian central character from being dissolved into the "deeply readable" does not envelop Sammler, who is dispersed rather than concealed, but instead casts its

perimeter around *his words*. The novel provocatively assumes that "we know" what Sammler is talking about, that "the terms" to which he alludes go without saying. John Jacob Clayton correctly identifies the ending as one "not derived from the material of the novel", but mistakenly concludes that "the novel as a whole gives us not love but emotional withdrawal".⁴ The "material of the novel" is a series of figures in the midst of which Sammler finds a point of orientation, something to "love", only to lose it. John Bayley makes the essential observation that Elya is "a character who does not – cannot – see his own consciousness in fictional terms", an inability unique in *Mr Sammler's Planet*, and the cause of the attraction he holds for Sammler.⁵ Sammler is as much a creature of the fiction-ridden, symbol-heavy zone as are its denizens, whom he detests. In the closing scene, Biyot K. Tripathy comments, "the world and the life lived in it (...) have decomposed into organic and inorganic plasma, an ionized state as it were".⁶ This is the heat-death towards which all of Bellow's satiric domains entropically incline, and one into which Sammler vanishes, having performed a vital duty; the novel sites its point of rest, its potential for fiction-free "meaning", in the form of Elya, and then removes it, in an act of elision which entails Sammler's elegy for a "character" which differs from any available elsewhere in that "ionized state". If the novel does indeed give us "emotional withdrawal", then it does so in elegaic form, in recognition that Elya Gruner – in truth, the central character of *Mr Sammler's Planet* – cannot live according to the set of terms which constitutes "the material of the novel".

Mr Sammler's Planet, in its conclusive decentralization of its supposed central character, reaches a cold-eyed ending which recalls that of *Dangling Man*. Like Joseph, Sammler is characterized, convicted, categorized; David Galloway, reading the novel as a barely disguised jeremiad levelled against the modern world, finds that Bellow manipulates Sammler "as a 'kind of ventriloquist's dummy', quite without potential as character."⁷ But *Mr Sammler's Planet* is constructed so that any inferred resemblance between "character" and "author" works to its advantage; in such a reading, the ironies which enclose Sammler extend outward to discredit the authorial function itself, a guilt by association which the novel, so remorselessly conscious of the self-reflexive fate of fiction, readily acknowledges. Its characters, Sammler observes, get their ideas "from literature", distil a new "residue" from the decayed elements of an older "fiction" (18, 19). "Art", in Eisen's hands, becomes

not merely a heavy influence but a weighted weapon. The spectre of authorial overdetermination, which haunts all of Bellow's works, here takes possession of the body of the text, and the novel's conclusion, a vain protest made to one ghost by another, precludes any hope of exorcism.

* * *

David Galloway goes on to chastise Bellow for his "disinterest in formal experimentation", in a complaint based upon a prevalent view of Bellow as a traditional realist.⁸ For Malcolm Bradbury Bellow is, at his most extreme, a modernist, "a novelist of conditional form; he has not become a post-modernist writer, concerned with the problems of fictionality or the redemption of text".⁹ Tony Tanner sees Augie March, Eugene Henderson and Artur Sammler at their stories' ends as being "damaged, wiser perhaps, but unsilenced and still there in the text": "they are not exposed to [Thomas] Pynchon's 'zone' in which everything, from categories to characters, is blurring and dissolving. They are not finally disassembled or broken down".¹⁰ Raymond M. Olderman, however, takes care to note that Bellow's "world view and that of Pynchon are at heart similar" before asserting that "the worlds their characters inhabit are different in a variety of obvious ways", and that the authors ultimately "deal with different truths".¹¹ Although the "differences" must be noted – Bellow's own formulations of them, in *Herzog* and elsewhere, are on record – the readings of his fiction which I have attempted tend to conflict with those put forward by Galloway, Bradbury and Tanner. Although the epithet "post-modernist" may not apply to Bellow's works, the possibility of the text's "redemption" is one of their central preoccupations, a "redemption" which requires that the centre of the central character, the content of the ultimately unsuitable form, is climactically excused from being "there". What prevents Bellow's "formal experimentation" from being commonly acknowledged is that the "blurring and dissolving", the processes by which "character" is simultaneously grounded in and dispersed through the "deeply readable", is "disassembled" and "broken down", are not separable from the functions of the individual consciousnesses at his novel's centres (as when Sammler "*felt that he was breaking up*", emphasis mine). Bellow casts his lot with

that which he educes into "character", refuses to subjugate it to the rule of a foregrounded "experiment".

In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Tyrone Slothrop is no longer "any sort of integral creature" by the novel's end, other characters having given up "long ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept", although "some believe that fragments" of him "have grown into consistent personae of their own".¹² Thus, "Slothrop" is rendered finally unreadable: "there's no telling" who are the "offshoots of his original scattering" (GR, 742). He is placed beyond reading's reach, as are Tommy Wilhelm and Moses Herzog. The crucial difference between *Gravity's Rainbow* and Bellow's novels lies not solely in their approach to "character", nor in their apprehensions of themselves as texts, but in the way the two features combine. *Gravity's Rainbow* foregrounds its opacities and omissions by means of the ellipses which proliferate throughout the text, and cumulatively imprint an afterimage ("...") on the reader's eye. As the novel proceeds, it emerges that these marks on the page exhibit the novel's reaction against its own verbal constructions. A musical analogy is offered implicitly in the form of a piece performed by a string quartet:

Dynamic shifts abound. Imperceptible lifts, platooning notes together or preparing for changes in loudness, what the Germans call "breath-pauses," skitter among the phrases. (...) after a while the listener starts actually hearing the pauses instead of the notes. (GR, 713)

These recurring "pauses" in the text are rehearsals for the novel's climactic elision of the verbal, in its concluding sentence: "now everybody-". Although this purports to invite the novel's reader in the chorus of a song (which, given the novel's apocalyptic bent, may also be the "screaming" which "comes across the sky" in its first sentence), it depicts the cancellation of language ("now everybody") by a grammatical sign of no fixed representation ("-"). After Slothrop is excused his duties as "central character", Pynchon's systems continue; the dismantling of "character" proves to be only one aspect of a larger process.

Bellow's novels, on the other hand, cannot outlive their heroes. Their systems are finally effaced by their dependency upon "character", upon that which cannot be entirely dissolved into them. As Pynchon's musical analogy for his own writing shows, *Gravity's Rainbow* is an *autoparadigmatic*

text, in that it provides the reader with models for, and rubrics for the interpretation of, itself. It foregrounds its own self-reflexive aspects, takes itself as its own subject matter. In Bellow's fiction, the self-reflexive is an *occluded* subject matter, unspoken yet pervasive throughout, an underlying proof of how the text tends (or, as in *Dangling Man*, *Seize the Day* and *Herzog*, *intends*) to evict the centre from the central character. His "formal experimentation", which nears his narratives' surfaces at their conclusions, takes the form of an *antiparadigmatic* drive, an insistence that the text, an ultimately parasitic structure, must surrender its models and rubrics, must defer to the persistence of that which it has configured as "character".

Bellow's novels end by abjuring not language itself, but rather the uses they have made of it; to rub out the word would be to deny Moses Herzog, for instance, a return to it on his own terms. Bellow's characters, parenthesized into unsuitable forms for most of their duration, coldly eyed by the "deeply readable", specimens in an "experiment", usually escape the fate of the "finished product", surviving instead as opacities and accretions in the texts which would encipher them. Each novel's ending (with the exception of *Dangling Man*) leaves that residue intact, releases that which has been characterized, convicted, and categorized, from its readings in the underground.

Notes

One: Introduction, via "The Old System"

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